



FYmemoriesofthe'30s

The hen house
by Mary Cook

Filling the wood box and drying the dishes were chores I had to do every day. And as I got older new chores were added to the list. I always thought it was a real privilege to be given a job that one of my brothers or sister had always been responsible for. To me it was a sure sign I was growing up. And so the day Mother said I was old enough to look after the hens and the hen house was a red letter day for me. I had turned seven a few months before, and for a long time Mother had been talking about giving me added duties. Half the fun was anticipating what the new chore would be. I longed to bake bread, or run the Treadle Singer Sewing machine, but my older sister Audrey said I would have to wait a long time for the privilege. She was eleven years older than I was, and I thought she had been sewing on the machine since before I was born! But every time I suggested I might try it, Mother would always say, “in good time”, which to me was another way of saying I was still a baby!

It was at the breakfast table that Saturday that Mother said I had finally earned the right to look after the hen house. Up to then, my only connection with the hen house was gathering eggs every day. But this was to be different. I was actually going to be responsible for the hens.

The hen house was a small building with a slanted roof, and a row of windows all along one side. A string of nests, like little box cubicles, hung from one wall, and it always amazed me that the hens knew enough to go into a nest to lay their eggs. I thought it would have been much easier to lay them right there on the floor, but it didn't matter; when I went into the hen house there were always three or four hens nesting.

The first chore I was given was making sure there was an abundance of fresh yellow straw in the nests every day. I had to carry it over from the barn, dig out the old straw and line the nests with the new stuff. I took the job very seriously, and so made sure there was a little hollow in each nest to make the laying as comfortable as possible. I had often seen a hen lay an egg, and I can remember wondering how it ever lived through the ordeal. It looked like a mighty painful exercise to me.

I was also given the job of making sure the water was always fresh in the long shallow

tin trough. This meant I had to dump the old water out every morning and night, and fill a pail at the pump in the middle of the yard and haul it into the hen house. It was heavy, but Mother said it was quite alright to make two trips with a half pail at a time, which is what I decided to do after spilling most of it against my legs the first time I did the job.

By far the most pleasant part of my new chore was feeding the hens. No one can tell me to this day that hens aren't smart. They knew when I was coming with that pail of grain. And they knew it wasn't water. As soon as I went into the hen house with the pail of grain, there was such a cackle from all of them you couldn't hear yourself think.

They would come crashing from every corner of the hen house. Even the hens in the nests would flutter down and fight for a position at the feeder. I would have to shoo them away with my foot to get the pail close, and you would think they hadn't been fed for days. When they were so intent on eating, I was able to crouch down and pat them. They were far too interested in what was going into their bellies to worry about being frightened of me.

I can remember now how astonished I was to find that the hens were mostly all feathers. Their bodies, when I touched them, seemed pathetically thin to me. And I at once felt such a sadness for them. Because I knew where those hens would eventually end up. For the longest time I wouldn't eat chicken at Sunday dinner. Mother would again tell me that farm animals and fowl were raised for that purpose, and that if we didn't eat what we raised, we would all starve to death. Finally, I went back to eating chicken and dumplings, but only if I had no idea which hen had been taken from the hen house.

I decided to give the hens names. Several who all looked the same, all got the same name: Biddy. And one hen became a favourite, and I called her Ethel. She was an outcast amongst the others, and I reckoned it was because there was hardly a feather on her body. She never did grow very big either, which was another reason I felt sorry for her. She was the only hen in the entire coop who would come to me whether I had the grain pail or not, which led me to believe she was smarter than the others. I often made a little carry-all out of my apron, and I would tuck her into this little pocket and lug her all around the yard, which my hateful brother Emerson said was a big mistake. He said that any day now, she would be singled out for Sunday dinner. So I got to putting Ethel in the very back of the chicken coop, and for the longest time, she avoided the fate that I knew in my heart would eventually end our relationship.

I wasn't too fond of cleaning out the building, but alas that was one of the chores that went with the privilege of being in charge of the hen house. I hated the smell, so I did what my sister always did when the job used to be hers. I would put my finger in the vanilla bottle and rub it on my top lip under my nose just before I went inside. All I could smell was vanilla during the time I was doing that dirty job.

As I grew older, other jobs became my responsibility. I got to use the flat iron, roll out pastry dough, and help when it was time to put down pickles and preserves. Yes, indeed, I was growing up, and each time a new job was added to my chore list, I felt that it wouldn't be that long until I would be taken in to Walker's Store in Renfrew to be fitted for my first bras.

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