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The Darkling

By Mace Tawney

Illustration by Darsi Ward



His overalls were brown with dirt and soiled with patches of grease. Yellow teeth and a hint of brown in the cracks and corners of his lips betrayed the heavy use of tobacco. His large hands were rough with callouses; and a tan, wrinkled face, much like that of a raisin, showed signs of wear from the sun. His physical appearance didn't matter much to Tood; what mattered was that he was a farmer and a good one to boot. Better still, he lived in Green Valley, nestled among the foothills of the Wichita Mountains, or simply God's country, as he preferred to call it. Everything he needed to live and prosper was there, and what wasn't could be bought at the general store in Mountain View.

Over the years, Tood's farm had been quite successful, and this year was no exception. However, there was one minor problem which was rapidly growing into a major one: something had been stealthily stealing his fryers.

Tood kept his chickens in a secure pen which he had painstakingly built himself. The chicken wire ran three-fourths of the way around the pen, with two two-by-twelves running along the bottom. Roofing consisted of a sheet of rusting tin, and though partially open, it kept out predators. The hen house itself provided the fourth wall.

Everything about the pen was secure. Yet it never failed that every three or four weeks, Tood would go out and discover some of his most promising fryers gone. No signs of digging or openings in the wire or boards could be found. Tood was losing chickens to something that was sly enough to get in and out of the pen without leaving a trace of its presence.

In order to try to extinguish the problem, Tood tied two of his dogs to the hen house, one to the front and the other to the back. If anything approached his chickens, the dogs would at least give him a sufficient warning. The dogs never once barked during their long watch at night, and five days passed without incident. But on the sixth day, Tood discovered that two more fryers were gone, and no sound had been heard from the dogs.

Tood decided to change his tactics. He laid traps out around the pen in all directions so that anything that moved near it would be caught in an instant. Days passed, and while not one trap was sprung, he still lost more fryers.

It became apparent that whatever was stealing the chickens was quite clever--clever enough to skirt around the traps and not provoke his dogs. Tood finally decided that the only way to catch

this thief was to keep watch all night himself.

He climbed into the hen house and began his vigil, and two nights passed without result. On the third night, however, Tood's persistence paid off. As the hour before dawn approached, he began to realize that he was no longer alone. The entrance of the creature was so quiet that only the prickling of the hair along his neck and spine betrayed its presence. Adrenalin pumped quickly within Tood's body. He leaped blindly at the creature, pinning it between his body and the ground. Lighting his lantern, Tood held the light over the thief in anticipation of finally seeing what had been tormenting his fryers for so many weeks.

Tood stood in shock as a high, whining voice shrieked, "Doan hit me, Missuh Hardin! Please doan hit me!"

Lying before him was the daughter of one of his field hands, disguised within her own skin. ■

MACE TAWNEY, a freshman at SOSU, whose hometown is Ardmore, is a new contributor to WESTVIEW. Mace has spent many summers around Western Oklahoma, especially in the Mountain View area.