

“Henny Penny & The Puppies”
an unlikely animal friends adventure

Back in the long ago, when I was a little twerp and a millstone around my mother's neck, I lived with my three brothers, a sister, and my overwrought parents in a big-old two-story house in the rural countryside. We had a one-acre farm with ducks, chickens, geese, turkeys, rabbits, cats, and dogs, and who-knows-what-all, like mice and skunks. They all required feeding, watering, and cleaning up after, which we all took turns at. Oh, and there were eggs to gather and meat to be had, if one knows how.

I was oftentimes sent to the barnyard for that morning's eggs, with the added reminder not to forget about them. It was not very fun to reach into my jacket pocket and feel the sticky slime of a broken egg! Plus, they had to be undeveloped ones. There was nothing like cracking open a fertile egg at breakfast time discovering a chick or duckling inside! Chicken eggs were sometimes tricky to gather and I always hoped one hen in particular would not peck me as I delicately reached beneath her for an egg. Duck eggs were fun to gather. The rotten ones would be rolled out of the nest by the mother, so those were tossed out into the field. The good ones were underneath her warm, feathery body. She would lightly pinch or nibble my hand with her bill when I reached for an egg. When the ducks and chickens were broody and sat on a clutch of eggs, we waited for them to hatch. I spent hours cuddling and mothering every baby. I would carry one swaddled in my sweater and neighbors would reprimand me, telling me to take that baby chick back to its mother this instant! How did they know? Oh, well, there were baby rabbits, too. With arms scratched and bleeding from their sharp claws, I held each one, petting their soft furry ears.

Besides eggs, butchering animals was the unpleasant side of barnyard living. Mornings before school, my mom would yell at my eldest brother, telling him to kill a chicken for dinner that night. I don't remember eating those chickens, but I'll never forget four of us lining up all dressed for school, lunchsacks in hand, as big brother stretched the chicken's neck out across the chopping block. It was a bloody round of wood sitting out behind the garage. We waited to see what the chicken would do, hoping it would run off headless into the field. My pacifist brother hated this job, but there was nothing worse than when the geese were killed. They were White Chinas, nature's watchdog, which were equal in height to my eyes as they came at me in the barnyard, sometimes with heads lowered and hissing. Tubs of hot water for plucking and collecting feathers-- Oh! I can still remember that awful smell. The saddest day was seeing the baby rabbits all lined up in butcher paper. None of us could eat them. We gave them back to the person who had butchered them for us. So much for raising our own food!

The days wound around and the barnyard changed to accommodate pets. Eventually, we settled on bantam chickens, which were very entertaining. We began with a pair of Golden Seabrights, a rooster and a hen. One day, the rooster was eaten by a skunk, leaving the poor hen widowed. We named her Henny Penny. She mourned for a time, crowing each morning in fond remembrance of her late husband. Lonely, she took to following us around, asking to come into the house by pecking on the door or the window of whatever room we were in. She enjoyed watching tv with us or sharing in a meal. Then, she took to tagging along with the cat and the dog. The dog, a German Shepherd, had a litter of puppies old enough to be brought outside during the day. Henny wanted to have her own pets, so she made pets out of the puppies. She loved playing with them, eating with them, and even sleeping with them.

It all began with her joining in their feeding time, running up when the moistened kibble was brought out for the puppies to eat. She'd squeeze in and eat from the pan with them. That was when things soon turned rather odd. She began to stick around, letting the puppies pull on her wings, sometimes two at a

time, like tug of war, pulling her one side to the other. I believed she didn't care for that and tried to rescue her, but she kept going back for more! When they slept in their pile, she scooped in among them. When she was ready to play, she would peck each snoozing pup on the head, letting them know it was play time. They would start in again and we all shook our heads at what was surely an unlikely animal friendship!

We made regular trips to the feed store and, little by little, brought home more bantam chickens and even some more ducks. The puppies found homes, so life moved on to other barnyard adventures, like triple-decker mating when the ducks were placed in the swimming pool! Even a rescued crow joined the gang, but was taken back to the wilds. Eventually, the chickens and ducks were sold and the barnyard was torn down and life in the fast lane began to take over. Myself and my siblings became teenagers and were getting jobs, not wanting to help out anymore, one by one leaving home. I left home, too, and raised chickens and ducks of my own in that faraway land of Bigfoot. But, that's another story, another unlikely animal friend adventure starring Blue Eyes, Barney Beagle, Gimpers, Mama Cat, and one rowdy horse!