

## **Chicken Thief**

By

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The stillness of the languid summer night was broken by the frenzied squawking of chickens and the furious barking of the dog. Anecleto jumped into his jeans and bounded down the stairs in leaps. Flipping the outside light on as he leaped out the back door, he saw a frail figure scrambling through the barbed-wire fence. The man was almost through when the dog lunged, bit and held on to his left arm.

"Get 'im, Wimpy!" Anecleto yelled.

The man struggled, pulled his arm free, crashed through the underbrush and escaped into the woods with a chicken under his arm.

Anecleto's father came up behind him. "Did you see him, Dad?" Anecleto called. "Wimpy got him good!" His father closed the gate to the chicken coop, then walked to where Anecleto was kneeling, petting Wimpy, a big, strong, short-haired mongrel with a massive head, a black snout and a reddish brown coat.

"Did you see him, Dad?" Anecleto repeated. "Wimpy got him good. Here's part of his shirt." Anecleto stood up and showed the remnant to his father. "It has blood on it! Wimpy's a good dog."

"Yes, Wimpy is a good dog," his father said, softly.

"Aren't we going after him?"

"No." After a few seconds he added, still in a low tone, "Go back to bed, son."

Anecleto detected no excitement or satisfaction in his father's voice, but that didn't dampen his exhilaration. Not now. Not ever. But especially not now, toward the end of summer, when hunting, fishing and hiking had become routine and the only picture show in town had closed. Tomorrow he would go into the woods with a purpose.

Anecleto was up at dawn. He dressed quickly and sneaked out of the house. With Wimpy at his side he walked half a block to a small frame house that had never been painted and had now weathered to a dull gray. He swung around the right side of the house went directly to a window facing the backyard.

"Alfredo," he whispered. "Alfredo."

"*Que pasa?*"

"We were robbed last night!"

"I'll be right out."

Anecleto turned away from the window and waited for his friend under a large mesquite tree. The morning was chilly. The sun was still low and long shadows fell across the level, hard-packed backyard giving the dirt a bluish tinge.

Anecleto thought about his friend. Alfredo was also twelve years old and they were the best of comrades; neither would think of doing anything without the other. The obvious difference in their material wealth was unimportant and generally unnoticed, except at Christmas. Especially last Christmas when he, unthinkingly, shoved Alfredo his gifts and demanded to see his and Alfredo brought out a pair of pants and a belt. Anecleto felt bad. Alfredo didn't or at least, he didn't show it.

There were other differences. Alfredo did not live with his parents, but with an old woman, who always dressed in black. Anecleto was never sure of the relationship, but he believed she was a great aunt. He had a father who would visit from time to time, then go away. Anecleto never met Alfredo's mother; perhaps she was dead.

Minutes later, Alfredo stepped out of the house, bare from the waist up, a shirt in one hand and a towel around his neck. They had no indoor bath and the lavatory consisted of a stool and a basin set next to the faucet outside the house. Alfredo hung his shirt on a nail, filled the basin with water and began washing. While Alfredo washed, Anecleto excitedly told him about the theft, with

special emphasis on Wimpy's part and embellishment of the preposterous actions of the thief.

Alfredo encouraged Anecleto with enthusiastic "Really?'s" and each time Anecleto, acting out the scenes, recalled details making his part more prominent and the actions of the thief more ridiculous. Generally, Alfredo would tone down Anecleto's tales, but this was one of those rare moments when they were perfectly in tune and reached a new high in comradeship. There were no questions, no doubts--they would track the thief.

It was easy to track the first few feet, where the thief had crashed through the underbrush, but this led to a path that later met more than a dozen trails that honeycombed the woods.

Anecleto took the blood stained cloth out of his pocket, Anecleto held it for Wimpy to smell. The dog sniffed the cloth, wagged his tail and waited.

"He's not a hound," Alfredo said, wisely.

Anecleto, saying nothing, stuffed the cloth back into his pocket. He knew Alfredo was right and briefly resented it. But he and Alfredo knew these woods, and if the thief was still there, they'd find him, with or without a hound.

They had already followed several trails without any luck and were on the third, when suddenly, Wimpy's hair bristled and he began to growl.

Anecleto grabbed him by the collar and after a quick look around, he noticed a clearing about twenty yards off the trail. The campsite looked abandoned.

Anecleto signaled Alfredo, who was behind him, and together they worked themselves carefully through the underbrush for a closer look. The camp was not abandoned! There was a man lying behind a log, apparently asleep, but they could only see his left arm. It was the thief! He had a handkerchief wrapped around his forearm and it was stained with blood. As they were making their way to the other side for a better view, Wimpy's growl grew to a loud bark.

The man, startled, jumped to his feet.

"*Papá!*" Alfredo gasped.

Anecleto turned toward Alfredo, their eyes met for a moment before the dog demanded Anecleto's attention. The dog was strong, stronger than he had imagined and he had never seen him so enraged.

"You keep that dog away from me or I'll kill him," the man kept saying over and over in Spanish, pointing at the dog and backing slowly away.

All the time, Wimpy grew more menacing and harder to control. Anecleto hung onto the dog's collar as he pulled him into the clearing and Alfredo's father still kept backing away. Anecleto was hoping he would run!

The man stumbled and fell backwards.

Wimpy jerked away, slipped his head out of the collar and attacked the fallen man. Anecleto tackled the dog knocking him off the man. He held on to Wimpy by falling on him and wrapping one arm around his neck and the other across his body.

"Get out of here! Run!" Anecleto screamed.

The small, frail man scrambled to his feet and disappeared into the woods.

Alfredo was gone. Anecleto knew where he would be. At their hideout. A lean-to they had built in the side of a hill and camouflaged to avoid detection. When he reached it, he hesitated a moment at the entrance, then went inside. Alfredo was at the far end.

"Go away," he said, without turning around.

"Alfredo, I'm..."

"Go away." This time he turned to face Anecleto. Tears streamed down his cheeks. "Go away. I'll pay you for the chicken, if that's what you want. Just go away."

Anecleto went away. He did not want to. He wanted Alfredo's friendship more than anything else in the world, more than a chicken or a dog, more than anything. He wished that this had never happened. He turned away, noticed

Wimpy and kicked him. The dog yelped. Anecleto immediately went to pet him, but the Wimpy shied from his hand.

Anecleto sat under a big hackberry tree. He pulled his knees up against his chest. Tears came to his eyes. He cried a long time.