

# The Homesick Chicken

EDWARD D. HOCH

*So why DID the chicken cross the road, anyway? It's a mystery, but it's not one detective Barnabus Rex can't handle!*

Why did the chicken cross the road? To get on the other side, you'd probably answer, echoing an old riddle that was popular in the 'early years of the last century. But my name is Barnabus Rex, and I have a different answer.

I'd been summoned to the Tangaway Research Farms by the director, an egg-headed gentleman named Professor Minton. After parking my car in the guarded lot and passing through the fence-it was an EavesStop, expensive, but sure protection against all kinds of electronic bugging-I was shown into the presence of the director himself. His problem was simple. The solution was more difficult.

"One of the research chickens pecked its way right through the security fence, then crossed an eight-lane belt highway to the other side. We want to know why."

"Chickens are a bit out of my line," I replied.

"But your specialty is the solution of scientific riddles, Mr. Rex, and this certainly is one." He led me out of the main research building to a penned-in area where the test animals were kept. We passed a reinforced electric cage in which he pointed out the mutated turkeys being bred for life in the domes of the colonies of the moon. Further along were some leggy-looking fowl destined for Mars. "They're particularly well adapted to the Martian terrain and environment," Professor Minton explained. "We've had to do very little development work; we started from desert roadrunners."

"What about the chickens?"

"The chickens are something else again. The strain, called ZIP1000, is being developed for breeding purposes on Zipoid, the second planet of Barnard's star. We gave them extra-strength beaks something like a parrot's-to crack the extra-tough seed hulls used for feed. The seed hulls in turn were developed to withstand the native fauna like the space-lynx and the ostroid, so that-

"Aren't we getting a little off course?" I asked.

"Ah-yes. The problem. What is a problem is the chicken that crossed the road. It used its extra-strength beak to peck its way right through this security fence. But the puzzling aspect is its motivation. It crossed that belt highways-a dangerous undertaking even for a human-and headed for the field as if it were going home. And yet the chicken was hatched right here within these walls. How could it be homesick for something it had never known?"

"How indeed?" I stared bleakly through the fence at the highway and the deserted field opposite. What was there to attract a chicken-even one of Professor Minton's super-chickens-to that barren bit of land? "I should have a look at it," I decided. "Can you show me the spot where the chicken crossed the highway?"

He led me around a large pen to a spot in the fence where a steel plate temporarily blocked a jagged hole. I knelt to examine the shards of complex, multiconductor mesh, once more impressed by the security precautions. "I'd hate to meet your hybrid chicken on a dark night, Professor."

"They would never attack a human being, or even another creature," Minton quickly assured me. "The beak is used only for cracking seed hulls, and perhaps in self-defense."

"Was it self-defense against the fence?"

He held up his hands. "I can't explain it."

I moved the steel plate and stooped to go through the hole. In that moment I had a chicken's-eye view of the belt highway and the barren field beyond, but they offered no clues. "Be careful crossing over," Minton warned. "Don't get your foot caught!"

Crossing a belt highway on foot-a strictly illegal practice-could be dangerous to humans and animals alike. With eight lanes to traverse it meant hopping over eight separate electric power guides any one of which could take off a foot if you misstepped. To imagine a chicken with the skill to accomplish it was almost more than I could swallow. But then I'd never before been exposed to Professor Minton's super-chickens.

The empty lot on the other side of the belt highway held nothing of interest to human or chicken, so far as I could see. It was barren of grass or weeds, and seemed nothing more than a patch of dusty earth dotted with a few pebbles. In a few sunbaked depressions I found the tread of auto tires, hinting that the vacant lot was sometimes used for parking.

I crossed back over the belt highway and reentered the Tangaway compound through the hole in the fence. "Did you find anything?" Minton asked.

"Not much. Exactly what was the chicken doing when it was recovered?"

"Nothing. Pecking at the ground as if it were back home."

"Could I see it? I gather it's no longer kept outside."

"After the escape we moved them all to the interior pens. There was some talk of notifying Washington since we're under government contract, but I suggested we call you in first. You know how the government is about possible security leaks."

"Is Tangaway the only research farm doing this sort of thing?"

"Oh, no! We have a very lively competitor named Beaverbrook Farms. That's part of the reason for all this security. We just managed to beat them out on the ZIP-1000 contract."

I followed him into a windowless room lit from above by solar panes. The clucking of the chickens grew louder as we passed into the laboratory proper. Here the birds were kept in a large enclosure, constantly monitored by overhead TV. "This one," Minton said, leading me to a pen that held but a single chicken with its oddly curved beak, it looked no different from the others.

"Are they identified in any way? Laser tattoo, for instance?"

"Not at this stage of development. Naturally when we ship them out for space use they're tattooed."

"I see." I gazed down at the chicken, trying to read something in those hooded eyes. "It was yesterday that it crossed the highway?"

"Yes."

"Did it rain here yesterday?"

"No. We had a thunderstorm two days ago, but it passed over quickly."

"Who first noticed the chicken crossing the road?"

"Granley-one of our gate guards. He was checking security in the parking lot when he spotted it, about halfway across. By the time he called me and we got over there it was all the way to the other side."

"How did you get it back?"

"We had to tranquilize it, but that was no problem."

"I must speak to this guard, Granley."

"Follow me."

The guard was lounging near the gate. I'd noticed him when I arrived and parked my car. "This is Barnabus Rex, the scientific investigator," *Mintor announced*. "He has some questions for you."

"Sure," Granley replied, straightening up. "Ask away."

"Just one question, really," I said. "Why didn't you mention the car that was parked across the highway yesterday?"

"What car?"

"A parked car that probably pulled away as soon as you started after the chicken."

His eyes widened. "You know, you're right! I'd forgotten it till now! Some kids; it was painted all over with stripes, like they're doing these days. But how did you know?"

"Sunbaked tire tracks in the depressions where water would collect. They told me a car had been there since your rain two days ago. Your employees use the lot here, and no visitors would park over there when they had to cross the belt highway to reach you."

"But what does it mean?" Professor Mintor demanded.

"That your mystery is solved," I said. "Let me have a tranquilizer gun and I'll show you."

I took the weapon he handed me and led the way back through the research rooms to the penned-up chickens. Without hesitation I walked up to the lone bird and tranquilized it with a single shot.

"Why did you do that?" Mintor asked.

"To answer your riddle."

"All right. Why *did* the chicken cross the road?"

"Because somebody wanted to play back the contents of a tape recorder implanted in its body. For some time now you've been spied upon, Professor Mintor-I imagine by your competitor, Beaverbrook Farms."

"Spied upon! By *that-chicken?*"

"Exactly. It seemed obvious to me from the first that the fence pecking chicken was not one of your brood. It was much too strong and much too homesick. But if it wasn't yours it must have been added to your flock surreptitiously, and that could only have been for the purposes of industrial espionage. Since you told me Beaverbrook was doing similar work, this has to be their chicken. I think an X-ray will show a micro-miniaturized recorder for listening in on your secret conversations."

"Craziest thing I ever heard," Professor Mintor muttered, but he issued orders to have the sleeping chicken X-rayed.

"It was a simple task for them to drop the intruding chicken over your fence at night, perhaps lassoing one of your birds and removing it so the count would be right. Those fences arc all right for detecting any sort of bugging equipment, but they aren't very good at stopping ordinary intrusion-otherwise that wandering chicken would have set off alarms when it started to cut a hole there. Beaverbrook has been recording your conversations, probably trying to stay one jump ahead on the next government contract. They couldn't use a transmitter in the chicken because of your electronic fence, so they had to recover the bird itself to read out the recording. At the right time, the chicken pecked its way through the fence and started across the highway, but when the guard spotted it the waiting driver panicked and took off. The chicken was left across the road without any way to escape."

"But how did the chicken know when to escape?" asked Mintor. "Could they have some kind of electronic honing device...?"

I smiled, letting the Professor's puzzlement stretch out for a moment. "That was the easiest part," I said at last. "Imprinting."

"But..."

"Exactly. The highly distinctive stripes on the car. The Beaverbrook people evidently trained the chicken from-ah-hatching to associate that pattern with home and food and so on." A technician trotted up to the professor, waving a photographic negative. "The X-rays-there was something inside that chicken! "Well, Mr. Rex, you were right," the professor conceded. "Of course, in a sense the chicken *did* cross the road to get to the other side," I admitted. "They always do." "Have you solved many cases like this one?" I merely smiled. "Every case is different, but they're always a challenge. I'll send you my bill in the morning-and if you ever need me again, just call."

### Think About It!

**Answer the questions below in complete sentences on a separate piece of paper.**

1. What kind of work is performed at Tangaway Research Farms?
2. Why was Professor Mintor puzzled to find out that one of his chickens had pecked through the fence and crossed the highway?
3. Why did Barnabus Rex conclude that the tire tracks were made recently?
4. What information did Branabus gather before making a hypothesis?
5. What kind of reasoning did Barnabus use to find an answer?
6. Chickens, like many birds, imprint on a parent shortly after birth. The narrator used this characteristic to help solve the mystery of the homesick chicken. Think about another distinguishing characteristic of a living thing, such as a dog's sense of smell or a squirrel's instinct to hide nuts. Then write an outline for a mystery in which an animal's distinguishing characteristic helps a detective solve a case.

### Who's Edward D. Hoch?

Known for his exciting mystery stories, Edward D. Hoch (b. 1930) occasionally writes other forms of literature. "The Homesick Chicken" is a delightful story because it blends science fiction with elements of a detective story or mystery. Hoch has published more than 200 mystery stories in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*. He has worked as a full-time professional writer since 1968. Before that, he worked in libraries and advertising, and served in the U. S. Army. His greatest honor came in 1967 when he won the Edgar Allan Poe Award of Mystery Writers for his story "The Oblong Room." Currently, he lives in Rochester, New York, where he continues to write. His most recent works are two collections of his short stories, *Diagnosis - Impossible*, published in 1996, and *The Ripper of Storyville*, published in 1997.

### Read On!

If you liked "The Homesick Chicken," you can read more mystery stories by Edward D. Hoch. Some of these works include the following:

- *The Monkey's Clue*, Grosset, 1978
- *The Stolen Sapphire*, Grosset, 1978
- *The Night, My Friend Stories of Crime & Suspense*,