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It's Perfectly Certain

by

Hans Christian Andersen

(from *Hans Andersen Forty-Two Stories* [1930], translated by M. R. James)

"That's a terrible story," said a hen—it was in a part of the town where the affair had not taken place—"that's a terrible story about the hen-house! I shouldn't dare to sleep alone at night! It's a good thing there are so many of us on the perch." She proceeded to tell it, so that the feathers of the other hens stood on end, and the cock let his comb droop. "It's perfectly certain!"

But we will begin at the beginning, and this took place in a hen-house in another quarter of the town. The sun had set, and the hens had flown up to roost. One of them—she had white feathers and short legs—laid her regulation egg, and was a respectable hen in every way. Just as she got on the perch, she pecked at herself with her beak, and a little feather fell off her.

"There it goes," said she; "the more I peck myself the prettier I get!" It was said, to be sure, in fun, for she was the merry one among the hens, being for the rest, as I said, highly respectable, and thereupon she went to sleep.

It was dark all round; hen sat by hen, and the one that sat next to her did not go to sleep. She heard and she didn't hear, as indeed one must in this world if one is to live in peace and quiet, but she couldn't help saying to her neighbour: "Did you hear what was said just then? I name no names, but there is a hen who plucks herself to improve her looks. If I were a cock I should despise her."

Now just above the hens sat Mrs. Owl with her owl husband and owl children. They had sharp ears in that family; they heard every word the neighbour hen said, and they rolled their eyes, and the mother owl fanned herself with her wings. "Pray don't listen—but you must have heard what was said just then. I heard it with my own ears, and one's bound to hear a lot before they fall off! There's one of the hens who has so totally forgotten what is becoming for a hen that she sits there pecking off all her feathers and allowing the cock to look on."

"*Prenez garde aux enfants,*" said the father owl. "That's not a thing for the children to hear."

"But I must tell just the owl over the way; she is such a very well conducted bird." And off flew the mother.

"Hoo hoo! Oo hoo!" they both hooted down to the pigeons in the pigeon-house, over the way: "Have you heard? Have you heard? There's a hen who has plucked off all her feathers for love of the cock! She'll freeze to death, if she's not dead already. Oo hoo!"

"Where, where?" cooed the pigeons.

"In the yard over the way. I as good as saw it myself. It's almost too improper a story to tell; but it's perfectly certain."

"I'm sure, I'm sure of it; every single word," said the pigeons, and cooed down to their own hen-house: "There's a hen—some say there are two—who have plucked off all their feathers so as not to look like the rest, and attract the cock's notice that way. It's a risky game! One can easily catch a chill and die of fever, and they *are* dead, both of them."

"Wake up! Wake up!" crowed the cock, flying up on to the board fence. He was still a bit drowsy, but he crowed for all that. "There are three hens who have died of unrequited affection for a cock; they've plucked all their feathers off. It's an ugly story. I won't keep it to myself. Pass it on!" "Pass it on!" squeaked the bats. And the hens clucked and the cocks crowed: "Pass it on! Pass it on!" And so the story went from one hen-house to another, and finally back to the place from which it had really started.

"There are five hens", it ran "who have all plucked their feathers off to show which of them has got thinnest from affection for the cock! And after that they pecked each one another till the blood came and all fell down dead, to the shame and scandal of their family and the grave damage of their owners." And the hen who had dropped the little loose

feather naturally did not recognize her own story, and as she was a respectable hen, she said: "I despise those hens. But, alas, there are many of that class! A thing like this ought not to be hushed up, and I shall do what I can to let this story get into the papers, and be known through the whole country. That is what these hens and their families deserve!"

It did get into the papers, and was printed, and it is perfectly certain: one little feather can turn into five hens.

[End of *It's Perfectly Certain* by Hans Christian Andersen, from *Hans Andersen Forty-Two Stories*, translated by M. R. James]