

The Absolute Truth

A terrible incident!—said the hen who lived at the very other end of town, not where the incident had occurred.—A terrible incident in the henhouse! I simply dare not sleep alone anymore! Fortunately, there are many of us on the roost!

And she began to tell the tale, and so she told it that the feathers of all the hens stood on end, and the cock's comb shriveled. Yes, yes, the absolute truth!

But let us begin from the start, and it all began in the henhouse at the other end of town.

The sun was setting, and all the hens were already on the roost. One of them, a white short-legged hen, a hen in every respect well-behaved and respectable, duly laying the required number of eggs, having settled herself comfortably, began before sleep to preen and tidy herself. And—lo! one little feather flew out and fell to the ground.

"Look how it flew!" said the hen. "Well, no matter; the more you preen yourself, the prettier you become!"

This was said just in jest—the hen was generally of a cheerful disposition, but this did not prevent her from being, as has already been stated, a very, very respectable hen. With that she fell asleep.

It was dark in the henhouse. The hens sat close together, and the one sitting side by side with our hen was not yet asleep: she was not exactly eavesdropping on her neighbor's words on purpose, but rather heard them out of the corner of her ear,—for that is only proper if you wish to live in peace with your neighbors! And so she could not resist whispering to her other neighbor:

"Did you hear? I do not wish to name names, but among us there is a hen who is ready to pluck out all her feathers just to be prettier. Were I a cock, I would despise her!"

Just above the hens, an owl sat in her nest with her husband and little ones; owls have sharp hearing, and they missed not a single word of the neighbor. All of them meanwhile rolled their eyes vigorously, and the mother owl flapped her wings like fans.

"Hush! Do not listen, children! Though, of course, you have already heard? So have I. Ah! It makes one's ears curl! One of the hens has so forgotten herself that she began plucking out her feathers right before the cock's eyes!"

"Careful, there are children here!" said the father owl.—"One does not speak of such things in the presence of children!"

"We must nevertheless tell our neighbor owl about this; she is such a dear soul!"

And the mother owl flew off to the neighbor.

"Hoo-hoo, hoo-hoo!" both owls later hooted directly above the neighboring dovecote.—"Did you hear? Did you hear? Hoo-hoo! One hen has plucked out all her feathers because of a cock! She will freeze, freeze to death! If she hasn't frozen already! Hoo-hoo!"

"Coo-coo! Where, where?" cooed the doves.

"In the next yard! It happened almost before my very eyes! It is simply improper even to speak of it, but it is the absolute truth!"

"We believe it, we believe it!" said the doves, and they cooed down to the hens below:—"Coo-coo! One hen, though some say even two, have plucked out all their feathers to distinguish themselves before the cock! A risky undertaking. One can easily catch cold and die from it, and indeed they are already dead!"

"Cock-a-doodle-doo!" crowed the cock, flying up onto the fence.—"Wake up!" His eyes were still sticky with sleep, yet he was already shouting:—"Three hens have perished from unhappy love for a cock! They have plucked out all their feathers! Such a vile story! I will not keep silent about it! Let it spread throughout the whole world!"

"Let it, let it!" squeaked the bats, clucked the hens, crowed the cock.—"Let it, let it!"

And the story spread from yard to yard, from henhouse to henhouse, and finally reached the very place from which it had started.

"Five hens," it was recounted there,—"have plucked out all their feathers to show which of them had grown leanest from love for the cock! Then they pecked each other to death, to the shame and disgrace of their entire kind and to the loss of their owners!"

The hen who had dropped the little feather had no idea that this whole story was about her, and, being a hen in every respect respectable, she said:

"I despise these hens! But there are many such! However, one cannot keep silent about such matters! And I, for my part, will do everything to get this story into the newspapers! Let it spread throughout the whole world—these hens and their entire kind deserve it!"

And indeed the newspapers printed the whole story, and this is the absolute truth: from a single little feather it is not at all difficult to make a whole five hens!