

In Mouses' Clothing

The hen had been watching Tom for some time. Usually she treated cats, and Tom especially, with a disdainful disregard - and at a distance too. He never appreciated her caustic remarks. She was always beaking into his affairs. But then, fur and feathers rarely make for good friends. Tom was of the opinion that hens are not proper birds. *"They only flap their wings and pretend to fly,"* he mused sarcastically. *"They are always poking their beaks into everybody else's business, including mine. Hens are useless,"* he concluded. *"They spend the whole day wandering around, pecking the ground and waiting to lay an egg. They don't even run fast enough to be worth chasing."*

This morning, however, the hen had been taking a curious interest in Tom. She had been sunning herself, her wings spread out on the dry ground, when her attention was drawn to a rising cloud of dust in front of the new barn on the other side of the yard. She shook her wings and stretched her legs to get a better look. At first she was sure her eyes were deceiving her, but she had not been mistaken. The dust cloud was of Tom's making. He was rolling over and over on the ground. *"Fleas!"* the hen squawked. She felt a sneaking satisfaction at Tom's discomfort.

What followed was even more mystifying. Tom, covered in dust, his fur turned to shades of grey, crouched down, his belly close to the ground. His tail straight out behind him barely twitched. The hen watched him creep slowly along the side of the barn, keeping low in the grass, then rising high on his toes to make short fast runs first one way, then another until he ended back where he had started.²

The hen had to satisfy her curiosity. Pretending to peck at a trail of

corn, she made her way slowly towards the barn, stopping at intervals to get a closer look at Tom's antics. He was too engrossed in his own efforts to notice her coming and was quite startled when she clucked right by him. Obviously embarrassed, he sat up in a normal cat's leisure position, wrapped his tail round him and started to lick a dusty paw.

"What are you doing?" She had to know. *"I saw you rolling in the dust and thought you must have fleas, but nobody gets fleas that bad."*

"Fleas! Indeed I have not!" Tom responded indignantly, remembering a recent 'treatment' day under the firm hands of the lady of the house. The hen backed off a little. *"Well, what are you doing?"* she persisted. *"Nothing."*

"All that crawling in the grass and rolling in the dust was not for nothing," the hen persisted.

"It's an experiment," Tom conceded at last, with an inflexion which implied that experiments are secret things which should not be clucked about all over the farm.

The hen was not easily side-tracked. *"Experiment! What experiment?"*

"Well, if you must know, it's an idea I had. It's a new way I've thought of to catch mice. You see " Tom was warming to his theme *"... I thought that if I made myself look like a mouse, the mice will come closer to me. Then I could catch them easily!"*

The hen stared through her button eyes for a moment before exploding like a fire-cracker, in a succession of cackles interspersed with exclamations. *"The dust! To make your fur grey! The long tail! Short legs! All that running in the grass ... All because you're getting too fat and too slow to catch a mouse!"*³

Tom turned his back on the hen. It was better to sit this out than try to get to the farm kitchen in his dusty state. *"I said it was an experiment. It could have worked if you hadn't interfered."*

The hen cackled again. Tom knew that it would not be long before the whole hen-house would be cackling along with her ... everyone would want to know what it was about.

"Oh, dear!" She was rocking with merriment now - her red crown flopping from side to side. "Oh dear. I haven't laughed so much for months. I can feel an egg coming on. I suppose you'll stick feathers in your fur next and try to fly like a bird."

"That's more than you can do!" Tom could not resist a retaliation. "Birds are different," he snapped without looking at her. "A mouse is too dull-witted to see the difference."

"Not so dim that they can't keep getting away from you," countered the hen. "Do you really think a mouse won't notice that you're bigger than him? Do you really think he won't see that you have different shaped eyes, and nose, and ears. You can hold that tail as straight as you like, but the mouse will see it's thick. She may even notice how thick you are!"

This was just too much for Tom. He sprang forward at the hen. She flapped her wings and ran away across the yard, leaving Tom with a brown feather in his claws. At a safe distance she stopped and turned to look back. *"See what I mean," she clucked. "I've never seen a mouse do that to a hen before. Tom, you're a cat. You were born a cat and you'll always be a cat. Every mouse in the barn knows that."*

In the Big Society no-one wants to be someone else. They just work at being a better version of the person they are.