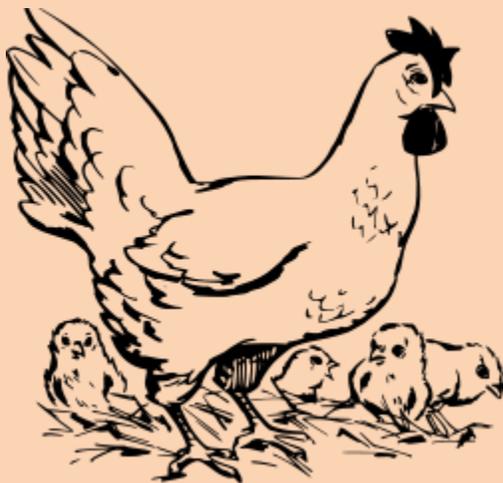


## Mistaken Intentions

A good feed and a sound sleep had put Tom in an unusually calm state of mind. So much so that he was taken completely unawares by the scolding tones of the lady of the house who appeared brandishing her favourite weapon - the broom.

At first he was totally bewildered by the high pitched scream. She could sound so undignified! To Tom, when she was really roused, she always sounded like an overgrown cat with a kitten's squeak.

*Don't you dare go near those chicks, she shouted. You dare touch them and I'll, I'll, I'll chop your tail in hundred pieces!*



The broom landed more than a metre from him but it was close enough to prove the lady of the house meant what she said. Tom departed the farm yard, and disappeared over the wall a lot faster than he had come. Curiosity soon had the better of him. He found himself a perch on the edge of the rockery from where he could watch events through the closed gate. But there were no events. Nothing was happening. The yard was quiet. There was no sound of machinery. Tom relaxed and sat washing his face with an *'as if I care'*, attitude.

Soon, quiet turned to boredom. Tom jumped down to venture through the bars of the gate. He had not seen Jamie today. Jamie was his ginger rival from the cottage in the lane. *I expect he's sunning himself at home*, thought Tom. Tom was not a little jealous of Jamie and not least because Jamie could do the inside leg wash while sitting on a window sill. Tom had had a number of abortive attempts at that. It occurred to him then that he had not seen his other rival for some time either. He thought that perhaps she may have been shut up in that prison with all the other hens. She was the only one who was free. *Serve her right*. On the rare occasion Tom had passed the hen house he could not believe the noise. His one hen clucked loud enough, but all of them talking together at the same time! And nobody minded! That was the injustice. When he and Jamie met a few friends for a midnight wassail a few weeks ago, everybody in the house objected!

Restless, Tom skirted the yard to pass, unseen behind the great barn. He sniffed his way round to the far side. He stopped and sniffed again. That sour fur smell could only be one thing. Fox! Tom dropped low and followed the scent. It was fresh. Now he could hear the hen. She was about after all.

In a moment she appeared from the barn doorway and all around her were yellow fluffy chicks, tumbling over one another in an effort to keep up with her. *So that's where she's been*. Tom said to himself. *And that's what the lady of the house was on about!* He watched, feeling very indignant. *As if I would touch them. They are all right with me. Well, as long as they don't grow up to be like their mother, and I only tease her. Perhaps I did make her lose a feather once but it was only one.*

Tom followed at a distance and watched as the hen led her brood to their nest behind some bales at the back of the barn. He was fascinated to see the way she gathered them and covered them all with her wings.

Tom was not the only one to have found his way into the barn. He saw the fox at about the same moment as the hen did. In a frantic panic and desperate to defend her young family, the hen flew at the fox squawking madly. The fox backed away. The hen led him out into the yard, but then the fox turned back. Tom had a unusual, strange warm defensive feeling creep over him like a glow from inside. He crawled in front of the chicks, blocking the entrance to their nest. With Tom spitting furiously in front of the fox and the hen returning to attack from behind, the fox made a reluctant exit over the bales.

Tom and the hen now faced each other. She, with only fearful memories of his teasing, started clucking and squawking again. She was even louder this time. Loud enough to rouse the lady of the house. Tom was just slinking from the barn when the broom fell, centimetres from him. He whisked his tail away just in time, and noting that the lady of the house was getting better with her broom aim. She was shrieking again, not unlike the hen this time. All Tom heard was, *and don't come looking in your dish tonight.*

The full injustice of the episode only dawned on Tom that evening when he found his dish empty. He watched all the lights go out while he sat waiting, hoping and not understanding.

***In a strange cat-like way,  
Tom had had an inkling  
of the most powerful thing in all the world  
- the thing that humans call love  
- and no-one believed him,  
because he was a cat.***