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The Question of a Feather

*How an Editor Got Out
of the Frying Pan Into the Fire*

THE EDITOR sat at his desk. He had been writing about hens all day, and he hadn't heard a hen since he left home in the suburbs in the morning, and he was tired of it. Perhaps the nearest live hens were in the death coops of the Faneuil Hall market. It was a hot day, and he had opened the window for air, but had let in only street noise and the smell of a livery stable. He was at his letters, and his brain reeled at the steady recurrence of the roup letter and the lice letter, and he was on the verge of things unimaginable when there came a fresh clear call from the fields.

It was just another letter, but the quaintness of it:—“You see many poultry places in a year,” it ran, “but perhaps have not happened to see—we thought you might be interested to see—a place of which it could be truthfully said, as of ours, that it was the result of following your instructions to the letter. Sister Martha has read your paper ever since we began to keep hens, and gives you all the credit for what we have made of our Minorcas. You have been our only teacher, and we want you to be the judge whether it has been to our advantage. We learn that you pass near us every day on your way to and from the city. Would it be overmuch to ask that you turn aside sometime to visit us?”

Here was precisely what the editor had always feared—that someone would follow his instructions to the letter, and therefore it had been part of his instructions that they should do no such thing. Before everything he had advised the use of judgment in keeping hens. So that if sister Martha had followed his instructions to the letter, be it upon her own head. He was sorry about her Minorcas. He wondered what sister Martha had managed to make of them—Leghorns or only scrubs. Still, he did not feel that he was to blame, and if he was, what was sister Martha going to do about it?

He smiled at his fancies, and as he did so looked at the clock. “I doubt if 'tis as bad as that,” he said, “but just to

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see how bad it is, or how amusing, why not knock off now, and look in on them this afternoon when I'm in need of the recreation? I never have seen a place of which it could be truthfully said that it was all my doing, and while I am not sure that I shall derive much pleasure from seeing one, I had much rather see it myself than have anyone else see it."

As he found his coat and hat, he tried to picture to himself sister Martha, the poultry woman, his constant reader. He thought he knew the type—"Old maid," he said, "and the one that wrote the letter, too. Innocent, credulous kind, or under the circumstances I shouldn't trust myself to their tender mercies in a lonely suburb toward supper time. Now if it was a man that wanted to confront me with his failure to make money in hens—but why speculate when I shall soon know."

On the electric cars he referred to the letter again, once for the address, and once to refresh his memory of the contents. He considered himself as having one of the good times incident to his calling. He liked nothing better than visiting a poultry farm, and visiting this one had a spice of real adventure.

"So here we are," he said at last, referring once more to the letter in front of a little vine clad cottage. The surroundings were almost rural. In the near distance lingered a dark clump of tall timber; there were fields and gardens and orchards. But here and there you saw a house going up, and you heard the sound of boards unloading, and of nails driven home. The city streets were there, too, though it was plain that the house he sought had been there before the streets, for it was set down without reference to their direction, like some mirage through which you might expect to see the more substantial objects behind it.

He satisfied himself from the safe side of the fence before it was too late to retreat had he cared to, that everything about the place was as it should be. The fruit trees were thrifty; the hen houses were right, and the yards were right, and, unless he was mistaken, the hens in them approximated Minorcas—Black Minorcas.

He thought as it was near feeding time he might catch someone out of doors, in which case he would make an in-

formal yard call, and get home to an early supper and long evening. And sure enough, as he stood irresolute who should click the latch of the hen house door but sister Martha herself, (as her looks told him), in her hand, for a subject of conversation, a pailful of eggs.

“And so these are the Minorcas?” he said. “They lay well. How many do you keep?” He had been within a thought of saying, “So this is sister Martha,” but had fortunately suppressed that as perhaps too much for a beginning. “I’m the editor of *Hendom*,” he made haste to add at the sight of the lady’s consternation.

“Oh, oh, Mr. Fulton. Won’t—well, sister Martha—won’t you come into the—” she appeared from her movements to break off in doubt as between house and hen house. She decided for the former. “Sister Martha will want to see you first. Won’t you come into the house?”

So there was some mistake, and this was not sister Martha. Well, if it was not it ought to be, and he did not cease to assert her claims to the name until presently in the house he was confronted by the superior claims of the other.

His visit made the ladies sit up very straight. In their embarrassment they let slip precious moments without a word. As much to help them as to make himself at home, the editor conceived and executed a pleasantry.

“To which of you after myself, always after myself, am I to give most credit for the pailful of eggs I have just seen?” But while serving to compose nerves, it had rather a sobering effect than the reverse. It was the author of the letter that spoke, “Sister Martha wouldn’t be able to do much, you know, and so the work out of doors falls to me; but she is the one that is interested in showing and such things.”

The editor, of course, had not known, but now he guessed. Sister Martha was an invalid, and the extent of her share in the hen business was looking at the hens through the window. It was only a sisterly fiction that made her chief poultryman.

The editor was properly subdued by the intelligence. Only after a prolonged pause did he attempt to give a more cheerful turn to the conversation by venturing to suggest that the subject of showing had been mentioned.

“Yes,” said the author of the letter, “we have not shown yet, but if we are prospered in our stock this year, we intended to go to Boston in the winter, and perhaps New York, and that reminds me—Martha, that feather; you are just in time, Mr. Fulton, to help us with that feather on the leg of, I think, our best pullet.”

“Pull it?”

“Yes, pullet.”

“Help you pull it, I mean.”

“Tell us whether it is right to pull it,” she answered, flushed and serious.

His call to see the hens had degenerated into a call on sister Martha, which was more than he bargained for, and now he found himself confronted with a very nice question of ethics that up to this time in his life he had always managed to avoid. The question of pulling feathers was one to which he had always thrown his columns open for discussion—freely, but you could ask anyone if he had ever joined in the discussion. He was above suspecting that he had fallen into a trap set by his enemies, but he liked the situation none the better. Perhaps he was unreasonably shy of old maids disposed to follow his instructions to the letter.

He was thinking, thinking, and Martha, seeing his difficulty, came to his rescue. “Perhaps Mr. Fulton doesn’t care to take it upon his conscience to decide for us in such a matter. It is too much to ask him.”

The editor laughed uneasily at her penetration. “Oh, don’t consider me,” he said gallantly, “anything I can do to help you.” But he was none the less inclined to temporize. “How comes a feather on the leg of a Minorca?” he asked.

“I know, and she from one of our best matings.”

“Bring her in,” said Martha.

The bird was brought, and sat cowering on the center table, unmistakably a picture pullet.

“Isn’t it a shame?” sighed Helen.

“I am afraid it is the temptation that is the shame,” said Martha. “We have had pullets before spoiled by a single defect, and have not felt as now. It is because the fault is so remediable. And people ought to face their own temptations, and not ask others to face them for them.”

“But temptation implies wrong, and we only asked Mr. Fulton to tell us if it is wrong.”

“We know it is wrong.”

The editor was grateful to sister Martha for letting him out. “Really,” he said, “I wish you wouldn’t ask me to decide for you. But I shouldn’t worry; ’tis a long time before the shows; the pullet may shed the feather.”

“But if she doesn’t?” said Helen, who was inconsolable.

“She may develop defects less remediable than a leg feather.”

“Oh, but she won’t,” persisted Helen. “She is well along now, and you know how it is with the Mediterraneans.”

He looked closer for the feather. He wondered if they would thank him for pulling it by stealth. What prevented him from pulling it, and so ending their perplexity, he did not know, unless it was the fear of lowering himself in the estimation of two very respectful ladies.

“Well,” he said, “I don’t see but that you will have to give up the idea of showing her.”

The sisters were glum. His visit had done them no good. He was disappointed. He reached for the knob of the door.

“I must be going, and I haven’t seen your place at all. Perhaps some other time.”

But one thing and another prevented his repeating the visit. He often thought of the two, however, and once alluded to them indirectly in an article on “Women and Poultry.” And at the Boston show he looked among the Minorcas for the outcome of their moral struggle. There was their pullet, disqualified. If those goody goodies hadn’t compromised by frankly showing her with the offending feather intact. Who but two old maids would have thought of that way out of it?

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