

"The Arnspiker Chickens"

• 1895 •

"WELL, IF THERE AIN'T THEM Arnspiker chickens in the strawberry patch *agin'*! Oh-*oh!* that's the fifth time this mornin', an' I've druv'em out with stove-wood every time. It don't do a bit o' good. They just git into a nice hill an' go to wallerin' an' scratchin' an' cluckin'! The cluckin' makes me almost as aggravated as the scratchin'—it sounds just as if they was *darrin'* me, because they know I durs'n't kill'em. Oh, just look at'em! A-*floundrin'* right in the middle of that nicest hill! It's enough to distract a saint! Father! Father! For pity's sake—can't you go an' scare'em out with stove-wood?"

Mr. Webster got up stiffy from the dinner-table. He was a patient-faced old gentleman with blue, dreamy eyes. He had a stoop in his shoulders—from overmuch hoeing in great potato fields, he always explained with his gentle smile; but some of his neighbors were wont to declare among themselves that "livin' all them years with Mis' Webster's tongue was enough to give him a stoop in his shoulders without ever tetchin' a hoe."

"Why, mother," he said, going hesitatingly to the kitchen door, "I don't like to throw stove-wood at'em. I might hurt'em."

"You might *hurt* 'em, aigh? Well, I want that you should *hurt* 'em. I want that you should *kill* 'em if they don't stay out o' that strawberry patch! What was the sense in our movin' into town to spend the rest o' our days if we're to have the life clucked an' scratched out o' us by our neighbor's chickens? You ain't got any answer to that, have you? Aigh?"

Evidently Mr. Webster had not. He took two or three

sticks of wood from the well-filled box, and started again, in a half-hearted way, for the door.

"Oh, my land!" exclaimed Mrs. Webster, contemptuously. She ran after him and snatched the wood from him. "Why don't you wait a coon's age? Why don't you wait till they scratch the strawberries up by the *roots*? I never see! I notice you like to eat the berries as well as anybody, but you ain't willin' to turn your hand over to take care of'em."

She rushed down the steps and out into the yard, throwing the sticks of wood with fierce strength.

Mr. Webster watched her with anxiety. "Oh, mother, look out!" he called deprecatingly. "You 'most hit that little pullet."

"I *want* to hit that little pullet!"

The chickens flew, cackling, over the low fence and down the hill.

Mrs. Webster stood watching them in grim satisfaction. When they had disappeared among the ferns she came back slowly. Her face was flushed with triumph. She was breathing hard. "I'll puller'em!" she said.

"You hadn't ought to throw at'em, mother." Mr. Webster spoke gently. "You might hurt one o' 'em. There's Mis' Arnspiker a-standin' in the door, a-watchin' you, too."

"Well, I'm glad she saw me. Where's my sunbunnit at? I'm goin' right down to give her a talkin' to. I've tell her three times now that her chickens is the ruination of my strawberries. All she ever says is, well, she's offul sorry, an' she thinks it's that old speckled hen's fault, an' she'll drive 'em down towards Burmeister's! I wonder if she thinks the Burmeisters want 'em any worse 'n I do! She's got to git red of them chickens, an' that's all there is about it. There's a law *agin'* havin' 'em in town an' I ain't a-goin' to stand it another day. I'll let her know I ain't a Corbett an' a Fitzsimmons to stand up an' be knocked down a dozen times!"

"Now, mother, if you go down there, you'll be sorry—"

"You 'tend to your own affairs, father, will you? I won't be set upon! There can't *anybody* set upon me—let alone that Miss Arnspiker!"

Mr. Webster went into the kitchen and sat down. "There's no use in argy'n' with Mari," he said, with a sigh of resignation.

Mr. and Mrs. Webster had crossed the plains in the sixties and settled on a ranch in what was then the territory of Washington. Here they lived a life of toil and privation—a hard, narrow, joyless life—until the "boom" came along in 1888 and made them wealthy.

Then they moved "to town" and built a comfortable home and settled down to the difficult occupation of finding content and peace.

Unfortunately they built upon a hill. There is something about a hill that attracts the large end of a spy-glass as a red rag attracts a bull. Soon after Mrs. Webster had laboriously and patiently climbed her hill and founded her home upon a beautiful height, the iron came into her soul and rusted there.

It was bad enough, she thought, in all mercy, to learn that her neighbors down below gossiped about her leaving her wash a-switching out on the line, all wet and dripping with rain, three days an' nights at a time; and about her using table-cloths with red borders when she could easy afford white ones; and about the unattended holes in the knees of poor Mr. Webster's undergarments; and about their only using three towels an' two napkins a week—but for them to figure out that she and her husband did not live harmoniously together, solely because four sheets and four pillow-slips were hung on the line every wash-day, turned her soul sick within her.

At first she bore it meekly. But one morning about ten o'clock while she was stooping over the colored clothes in the wash-tub, who should walk into the kitchen but Mrs. Peters in

her afternoon dress and white apron. There was a frill of lace at her throat, and she carried her "crochet."

At sight of Mrs. Webster she stood still and threw up her hands.

"Have you got a preparation?"

"Have I got a—*wharf*?" said Mrs. Webster, through the steam.

"Have you got a preparation?"

"A—*preparation*?"

"Yaas. A preparation. W'y, a rule. Have you got a rule?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"W'y, a rule to make a washing preparation by. I'll lend you mine. I had my wash all out on the line, an' my kitching an' porches an' steps an' all scrubbed by nine o'clock. I come to spend the day—an' here you ain't near through."

Mrs. Webster cleared her throat. "I've only got one rule," she said, "an' that is to do my visitin' on some day besides wash-day; an' I ain't got any preparation—for visitors *on* washday."

And she bent into the steam again and was lost to view. But now, of course, she had an enemy.

A few days later Mrs. Gunn came in to "set a spell." "I come to tell you about his brother-in-law's cousin, his wife," she said. "She's got creepin' paralysis in her arm. Creep—*my!* It'll more likely *run*. He was over to his brother's this morning and his brother says his cousin is all worked up. He wants I should go and make a visit on her to-morrow. I ain't suffering to—she's always been thinking herself so exalted, and so annimated over it. Maybe this'll take her down a peg. She won't go a-silking by quite so big—with creepin' paralysis in her arm! He says he's see the grocery wagon go there as high as three times a day. Has she ever made a call on you?"

"No, ma'am," said Mrs. Webster, politely.

"Well, it wouldn't of hurt her. I guess you don't feel bad.

She's perfectly frivolous. I can't abide her, but he says, well, never mind—she's in the family. I don't like the way her forehead protrudes back, anyhow. W'y, there goes Mis' Brun down town with a white petticoat on in all this rain! Did you ever hear tell? Oh, that makes me think! Mis' Brun told me she see a new cupboard a-coming up the alley, an' she thought it must be a-coming here. May I ask if it was Mis' Fiske's? She's selling out, an' we know where everything went to but the cupboard."

All these things and heavier Mrs. Webster endured, but they gradually embittered her. When Mrs. Arnspiker turned her hens out and they came strutting and clucking up the hill to her strawberry patch, her patience went out the window. The worn turned; and being of the long-suffering sex, it turned with unexpected vigor.

Mrs. Webster went down the narrow path among the ferns. She held her skirts up high on both sides.

The Arnspiker home was a small, unpainted shack. It had a dingy, spiritless look. Mrs. Arnspiker was a widow and she was very poor. She had no children and few friends. She took in washing; and she sold eggs.

She was standing on the back porch when Mrs. Webster opened the gate. She was a small, pale woman. Her face had many deep lines of care. There was a kind of entreaty in her faded eyes as she greeted her visitor. It did not move Mrs. Webster.

"How-d'you-do, Mis' Arnspiker?" she said, hostilely.

"How-r-you, Mis' Webster?" Mrs. Arnspiker's heart was beating fast and hard. "Won't you step in an' set down a spell? Or'd you ruther set down here 'n the sun? Here's a chair—excuse me! It ain't overly clean." She wiped it carefully with the wrong side of her apron. "You're looking reel well, Mis' Webster," she went on, diplomatically. It is better to be born diplomatic than rich. "I never see you looking better. My! the

color 'n that calico *is* becoming to you. Where'd you git it at?"

"Camellises." Mrs. Webster spoke icily.

"Go on! Well, you don't say! I didn't suppose they had any-thing so pretty in their store. It's offul becoming. That kind o' buff color alwus *is* becoming to a nice, *clear* complexion. There ain't many complexed just like you, Mis' Webster, an' so there ain't many that can wear buff."

There was a silence. Mrs. Webster sat looking fixedly at the hard, cleanly swept dooryard. There was not a blade of grass in it. It had a look of desolation—of utter abandonment to despair. She was thinking that it was not so easy to begin about the chickens as she had imagined it would be. After all, Mis' Arnspiker did have some taste about her. It had been only two days since that uppish Mis' Lawrence had giggled right in her face and cried out—"W'y, Mis' Webster, the idy! *you* a-wearing buff!" Giddy, fool thing!

Then she pulled herself together, and said sternly—"Mis' Arnspiker, I come down—"

"I wonder now," interrupted Mrs. Arnspiker, with a flushed air, "if you'd just as live tell how much it were a yard."

"How much what were a yard?"

"Why, that buff calico you're a-wearing."

Mrs. Webster lifted her eyes and looked hard at her neighbor. Her thin lips unclosed. She spoke slowly and firmly. She was not to be propitiated. "It were seven cents. Mis' Arnspiker, I come down—"

"I wonder 'f you'd mind my having one like it, seins we're neighbors. It wouldn't be becoming to me, though." Mrs. Arnspiker sighed. "There ain't a woman in town it 'ud become as it does you. There ain't a one."

There was another silence. A faint, uncontrollable blush of pleasure had arisen to Mrs. Webster's thin cheek. She sat looking up at her big, green house on the hill. Her heart stirred

pleasantly. She had never been told before that she had a clear complexion. Indeed, had Mrs. Arnspiker been a Catholic, she would have fasted a full week, in the hope of absolution for suggesting it now; being a Protestant, she meant to put a good sum in the missionary-box to ease her conscience.

"You can have a dress like it, if you want," said Mrs. Webster. "You're offul clever. I don't believe I can wear it, though; but you're offul clever. Who is that a-going along the path?" She stretched out her thin neck like a chicken and peered out from under lowered lids. "Oh, it's Mis' Ballot! I feel condemned. I ain't been to see her since her baby died. She took it so hard, too. She's a-going out to the cemetery now with a callo lily. Don't she look mournful all in black! I do feel condemned."

There was quite a softened expression on Mrs. Webster's face and all might have been well; but at that critical moment three hens, having been safely delivered of their daily contributions to Mrs. Arnspiker's store, flew from their nests as one hen and, floundering clumsily over the fence, made straight for Mrs. Webster's strawberry patch on a run, cackling triumphantly, as much as to say—"Do we not deserve a berry?"

Mrs. Webster's face grew black. "Mis' Arnspiker," she said, sternly; and Mrs. Arnspiker drew a long breath and gave up. "Your chickens have been in my strawberry patch ag'in, an' been the ruination of it."

"Oh, my!" said Mrs. Arnspiker, collapsing weakly. Mrs. Webster regarded her steadfastly and pitilessly. "I'm offul sorry."

"Well, I'm sorry, too, Mis' Arnspiker. I'm sorry just about ten dollars' worth. Bein' sorry don't seem to keep them chickens—" "It's that old speckled hen's fault!" exclaimed Mrs. Arnspiker, brightening as if with a sudden inspiration. "She coaxes the other 'ns up there. I'll have to drive 'em down towards—"

"Burnmeister's," interrupted Mrs. Webster, dryly. "You've been a-doing that for a month past." She got up slowly. "I reckon

you'll have to git red o' them hens, Mis' Arnspiker. I've had just about all of 'em I want. I ain't a Corbett or a Fitzsimmons—to stand up an' be knocked down a dozen times! I can't afford to set out berries for *hens*. How'd you like to have a nice place like our 'n, an' then go an' have everything ruined up by somebody's hens?"

"It seems to me," said Mrs. Arnspiker, with a sigh, "if I had a nice place like your 'n, I'd be so happy I wouldn't worry over little things like strawberries."

She did not mean to be impertinent. It did not occur to her that she was. She simply gave utterance to the thought as it came to her.

Mrs. Webster's face grew scarlet. She had been yearning for something at which she might take offence. It is not possible to give a piece of one's mind to a meek person. Now, this sounded like a challenge.

"Oh, you wouldn't, aigh? Well, I'll give you to know I've *slaved* for all I got, Mis' Arnspiker!"

"Well, so 've I," said Mrs. Arnspiker, with a simplicity that held unconscious pathos. "But, someways, Mis' Webster, some people slave an' git rich, an' other 'ns slave an' git poor."

This was a truth that had never presented itself to Mrs. Webster. For a full minute she was silent. Then she drew in her thin lips. "Well, this ain't got anything to do with the chickens," she said. "There's a law ag'in 'em, an' I reckon you'll have to either git red of 'em or keep 'em shet up."

"They won't lay if I keep 'em shet up," said Mrs. Arnspiker, helplessly. "I can't keep 'em shet up. I got to have my eggs."

"Well, an' I got to have my strawberries. I got the law. You can't git around that, can you? It ain't many as 'ud come an' argy with you 's I've done."

There was a deep silence. A brown hen came strutting about Mrs. Arnspiker's feet. She had a pert and flaunting air

that betrayed her habit of imposing upon that lady's affectionate regard for her. Mrs. Arnspiker looked at her. Her eyes filled suddenly with tears. "I don't believe I *could* part with that little brown hen," she said, brokenly.

"She's the worst of the hull of'em!" exclaimed Mrs. Webster, fiercely. "I've said all I'm a-going to. You can do just as you want, Mis' Arnspiker. But if them hens git into my strawberry patch ag'in an' ruminate around them vines,—you'll have to stand the damage. I got the law!"

She turned abruptly and went out of the yard. She held one shoulder higher than the other, and walked with long, firm strides, swinging her arms.

...

It was a week later that Mrs. Worstel came to spend the afternoon with Mrs. Webster. She brought a towel which she was hemstitching. The two ladies sat on the back porch, because it was shaded by hop-vines. The cool, salt breeze from off Puget Sound swept through, rustling the harsh hop-leaves and swinging the scarlet clusters of bloom on the wild honey-suckle vine over the window.

It was June. The "yard" was in its fairest beauty. The rose-bushes were bending beneath their riot of bloom. One bed was a long flame of ruddy gold where the California poppies opened their hearts. Another was bordered with purple and yellow pansies. Some tardy gladioli were thrusting their pale green swords up through the rich earth. Velvet wallflowers still sweetened the air. Bees waded through their pollen, and lavender butterflies drifted down on spread wings to find them. Banks of "summer snow" still made the terraces white.

"My-O, my land!" said Mrs. Worstel, dropping her work in her lap. "How sweet it is!"

"It is so," said Mrs. Webster, pulling herself up with pride. "There ain't many yards furdur along than mine, if I do say it. I never see such flowers in Peoria-'Illinois."

"Oh, did you come from Peoria-'Illinois? W'y, I'm from Quincy-'Illinois, myself."

"I want to know."

"Yaas. I stopped in at Mis' Arnspiker's as I come along. She's feelin' turrable bad."

Mrs. Webster looked up coldly. "What she's feeling bad about?"

"W'y, she's had to sell all her chickens. They was both-erin' some o' her neighbors—that Mis' Burmeister, I guess! She never does have a speck o' mercy on poor people! Mis' Arnspiker didn't say it was her, but I don't b'lieve anybody else 'ud be so all-fired mean. Go an' complain of a poor widow's layin' hens!"

There was a scarlet spot on each of Mrs. Webster's high cheek-bones. She was sewing and she did not lift her eyes. When the silence became oppressive, she said, grimly—"Is Mis' Arnspiker so offul poor?"

"My, yaas. That's all she's had to make a livin' off of—them hens o' her'n. I don't see what she'll do. She does take in a little wash, but she ain't able to take in enough to keep a flea alive—little, sickly thing! She's alwus havin' a felon. I've see her up an' a-washin' at four o'clock in the mornin'—"

"Four o'clock in the morning!" Mrs. Webster would have grasped at any straw to turn the conversation. "You! For mercy's sake! D'you git up so early?"

"No, but I was awake. I see her out the window. Four o'clock's my coughin'-time. I feel offul sorry for her. The way she did set store by them chickens! I've see her call 'em up, one at a time, in her lap to eat out o' her hand. An' that little brown hen—she just *loved* her! The tears fairly run down her cheeks

when she tell me about sellin' em."

"Hunh!" said Mrs. Webster, dryly.

"I should think that Mis' Burmeister 'ud be ashamed o' herself," continued Mrs. Worstel. "A body with a fine house an' comf'able off! Them that don't have any mercy on the poor needn't to expect none."

"Hunh!" said Mrs. Webster. After a little she added, weakly—"Well, I guess that she didn't want her neighbor's chickens a-ruminating in her strawberry patch. I guess she didn't want that her berries should be all et up."

"Oh, my! She'd best be buyin' her berries from poor people's raisin', instid o' raisin' her own here in town, just to save a few cents—"

She stopped abruptly. A deep color spread over her face. Her wandering eyes had fallen upon Mrs. Webster's strawberry patch down in the corner of the yard.

"Pfew!" she said, moving her chair a little. "How warm it's a-gittin'!... Well, it's mighty hard to be a widow an' sickly at that, an' then have your only means o' support took away from you by a complainin' neighbor."

Mrs. Webster cleared her throat. Her face took on a hard look.

"Well," she said, slowly, "I don't just agree with you, Mis' Worstel. It's ag'in the law to keep chickens in town, unless you keep 'em shet up. I don't see 's Mis' Arnspiker has got any call to go around a-talkin' about her neighbors because she had to git red o' her 'n."

"Mercy! She wa'n't complainin', Mis' Webster. She never said a word—not a single, breathin' word—ag'in anybody. She never even told me who it were that made a fuss. That's what made me feel so—the meek way she took it in. She said she knew it were ag'in the law, an' it wa'n't right for her to be a bother an' a aggravation to her neighbors, anyhow—but that

didn't make her feel it any the lesser to give 'em up. Said she knew most people 'ud *lauff* at the idy o' her a-feelin' so about a passel o' hens, but that most people wa'n't all alone in the world, an' poor as Job's turkey at that, an' so they didn't git their affections set on dumb animals like her 'n had got. She cried as if her heart was broke. The tears just *run* down her cheeks. She kep' sayin' she didn't see how she could git along 'ithout her chickens, 'specially that little brown hen. She ust to follow Mis' Arnspiker all over... I must go. How the afternoon has went. I've enjoyed myself, I declare. Oh, has Mis' Riley's son got an ear?"

"Has he got a—*what*?"

"An ear—has he got an ear?"

"An ear!"

"Yes, an ear. Has he got an ear—for music?"

"Oh," said Mrs. Webster, solemnly. "I do know."

"Well, I see his mother's got a teacher there givin' him lessons on his catarrh. I just wondered if he had an ear. Come over an' set the afternoon with your work. My, how sweet that mount'n bairn smells!"

Mrs. Webster walked with her guest around the house. She replied in an absent-minded way to Mrs. Worstel's extravagant praises of her bleeding-hearts and bachelor's-buttons and mourning-widows. She was lost in thought.

At the gate Mrs. Worstel paused. "Well," she said, with a long breath, "seems to me you've got everything heart could ask for."

"Wh'od she sell 'em to?" asked Mrs. Webster, suddenly.

"Who? What? Oh, Mis' Arnspiker? Why, she sell 'em to Mr. Jones, right down in the next block. He's got a reg'lar lot for keepin' 'em in. Well, good day."

When her guest was out of sight, Mrs. Webster put on her sunbonnet, and went out the gate. She gave a long look down

at Mrs. Arnspiker's little shabby house, with its hard, white yard and the sun blazing into its unshaded windows.

Then she turned down the street in the opposite direction. At dusk that evening Mrs. Webster walked into Mrs. Arnspiker's back yard. She carried a box with slats across the top. Between these slats arose the brown head of a hen with two very astonished and anxious eyes.

Mrs. Arnspiker sat alone on the porch, rocking slowly in a creaking chair. "Why, Mis' Webster!" she exclaimed. She stood up. Mrs. Webster set the box down at her feet.

"Here's your brown hen," she announced, without a change of countenance. "I've bought all your chickens back. The man'll bring the rest of 'em to-morrow. I had to pay once ag'in what you got for 'em, but I'd of paid three times ag'in but what I'd of had 'em!"

"Oh—Mis'—Webster—"

"Well, now, don't go to crying over a *hen!* You let your chickens run. We'll put some wire-netting atop o' our fence an' keep 'em out."

She half turned to go, and then stopped. "I'm sorry I acted up so over them chickens," she said, speaking very fast. "But the neighbors have just made a reg'lar Jezebel out o' me—a-prying an' a-spying."

She walked out of the yard before Mrs. Arnspiker could reply. Mr. Webster met her at the door. "W'y, Mari'," he said, mildly, "where you been?"

"Now, don't meddle," she retorted, sharply; but at once repented, and added in a conciliatory tone—"Mis' Worstel thinks Mis' Riley's little boy has got an ear. He's a-taking lessons on the catarrh."



"THE ARNSPIKER CHICKENS" was published in *The Outlook* in July 1895. It was reprinted in *A Forest Orchid and Other Stories* (1897) and in newspapers and magazines across the United States.

"The Arnspiker Chickens" is set in a small town on Puget Sound where everyone minds everyone else's business. In this story, Mrs. Webster is aggravated by the ways that the inquisitive women in the town scrutinize and gossip about her laundry, her purchases, her marriage, and other details of her life. Already frustrated, Mrs. Webster reaches her breaking point when the chickens belonging to her neighbor, Mrs. Arnspiker, begin to regularly raid her prized strawberry patch. "The Arnspiker Chickens" centers on small town life, friction among neighbors, and the struggle for women to achieve sympathy for other women.