

HOME CIRCLE.

TOPKNOT.

BY MRS. C. N. LIVINGSTON.

It was a fresh, bright morning in early spring. "The very morning to work out of doors," Mrs. Butler declared; so, donning a sun-bonnet, which she kept on purpose for gardening, and taking her trowel, she proceeded on a tour of inspection over the pretty lawn that surrounded her pleasant home.

She inquired into the needs of the crocuses and daffodils, told the hyacinths they were late in blooming, noted with pleasure the purpling buds of the lilacs, then turned her steps to the corner which needed her most—a bed of lilies of the valley, that were becoming far too numerous for thriving growth.

Mrs. Butler's next-door neighbour, Mrs. Lane, wanted a bed of lilies, too. If these were to be thinned out, why should she not have some of them? She had a spot of unoccupied ground, between the house and a high fence, damp and cool, just the place where those lily leaves would grow broad and green. So she hovered about her window, peeping through the half-closed blinds, until her neighbour had come over to the lilies, which were not far from the fence that separated the two lawns; then she threw a light shawl over her head and happened out. She ran down to the gate and took a look up street and down; then slowly coming back, stopped a moment over this and that shrub, to see if they were putting forth signs of life. At almost any other time she would have run out unceremoniously and asked for some. But there were reasons why Mrs. Lane felt a slight hesitancy in approaching her neighbour this morning. On account of some occurrences of the last few days, she herself had been nursing a little resentment; but she had come to the conclusion to put aside all ill-feelings and return to friendly relations. Mrs. Butler was too good a neighbour to break with lightly. She was half tempted, though, to go straight back into the house without speaking, particularly as Mrs. Butler did not once look her way. But, then, she wanted to break the icy little crust that was gradually forming between them, and this was a good opportunity; besides, she wanted some bulbs. So she came up to the fence where the lady stooped over her work, saying, "Good morning, Mrs. Butler," with a slight constraint in the tones, it is true. But the trowel went industriously on, and the head was not lifted. She evidently did not wish to hear; but Mrs. Lane tried again:

"Good morning! I say; what are you busied about so early?"

Then Mrs. Butler looked up, but the glance that flashed from her black eyes to the other lady was not such as she was wont to bestow upon her neighbour. Neither were the tones—that seemed to issue from the cavernous depths of a never-ending sun-bonnet—the cheery ones that belonged to Mrs. Butler, as she said,

"Whatever else I'm doing, I'm not slandering my neighbours."

"Indeed! And who is engaged in that business, pray?" and Mrs. Lane brought the shawl over her cheeks, so that her neighbour should not see the red that she felt was rushing into them.

Mrs. Butler stood up now, and the lady on the other side of the fence fairly quailed beneath the withering gaze, as, looking her full in the face, Mrs. Butler said—

"It is best to speak out plainly. Mrs. Lane, I do not wish to hold any conversation with you. I only show what a perfect hypocrite you must be to come around with your smooth 'Good-mornings' after what you told Mrs. Ketchum about me."

"Oa, now! You're making a mountain out of a mole hill," said Mrs. Lane, confusedly. "You'd better find out what I actually said to Mrs. Ketchum before you flare up so. A little explanation on both sides will straighten this thing all out, I dare say."

"No explanations," said Mrs. Butler. "that you can possibly make will satisfy me. Indeed I will not listen to any, and certainly I do not feel called upon to make any to you. So let it be distinctly understood, once for all, that I wish to have nothing whatever to do with you from this time forth." Saying which she picked up her trowel and marched off to the other side of the lawn, while Mrs. Lane beat a hasty retreat into her own house.

The first thing she did was to indulge in a good cry; the next, to make a firm resolve never to have anything more to do with Mrs. Ketchum, for telling what she had positively promised never to breathe to a living soul. Of course, she had broken her promise, else how would it have gotten to the ears of Mrs. Butler?

A hen is a seemingly inoffensive creature, but is capable of accomplishing a vast amount of mischief—far more than is generally supposed. If all the unhappy tempers and long-standing feuds that she has provoked were searched into, and results placed among our statistic and general averages—the number of quarrels to one hen—we should doubtless be overwhelmed. For it was nothing more nor less than a little gray hen that was the occasion of the sharp words that were so sadly out of tune with the song of the robins, the budding green and sweet spring airs of that morning.

There had been slight clouds in the sky between the two families on this account before. The Lanes had for years made a practice of keeping a few hens, thereby serving two purposes—keeping themselves in fresh eggs and testing the friendship, as well as cultivating the grace of forbearance, in their neighbours. They were not that exasperating sort of people, either, who were indifferent to the comfort of their neighbours. They cherished the delusion that they kept their hens at home, and they did aim to, but some of them had straying proclivities. Then they tried to keep them shut up, letting them out occasionally, keeping a sharp watch over them meanwhile. But it did seem as if some of these hens had "two presences," for while Mrs. Lane sat sewing by her window, casting her eye on them occasionally, sure that they were all there—Old Yellow, Speckle, White Topknot and Banty—that very minute two or three of them would be

scratching for dear life in Mrs. Butler's smooth, neat beds, just sown with early lettuce and onions.

It is a wonder that a woman with as much tinder in her composition as Mrs. Butler bore it as well as she did. Especially was Topknot, a saucy little gray and white hen, with a jaunty tuft on top of her head, peculiarly trying. Many a time had Mrs. Butler worked hard in her garden all the forenoon, and looked from her window an hour after to behold Topknot comfortably established in a well-fitting round hole of her own digging, in the very centre of a circular bed, carefully prepared and sown with seeds of some rare and highly valued flowers. Again and again was she stoned and driven home in disgrace, and, on complaint being entered against her, was shut up and securely fastened in, as was supposed. But whether she had the power of slipping through cracks, or not, she would, somehow, unaccountably effect her escape; and the next thing known of her, she would sit complacently in the very choicest part of Mrs. Butler's garden, a persistent, triumphant Topknot, utterly regardless of the poor little two-leaved plants that were uprooted and crushed beneath her. It was on one of these occasions that Mrs. Butler caught her, and in sheer despair and vexation, tossed her over the fence, accompanying the act with a hearty and audibly expressed wish that "that hen was dead."

Mrs. Lane, happening to stand at her chamber window, saw the hasty manner in which her favourite hen came home, as well as the exasperated expression on her neighbour's face, and likewise had an exaggerated report of what the cruel woman said, when she "heaved the poor creature over the fence," from Bridget, who was out in the woodshed at the time.

This episode, among other little things, caused a slight coldness to spring up between the ladies, so that for a few days the well-trodden path between the houses was not so much used as heretofore. In the meantime Topknot disappeared. She was not to be found in the barn loft, nor under the bushes, nor in any of the secret places about the premises of any of the neighbours; nor even in the barn of the Butlers, nor cosily settled under the low-spreading branches of their evergreens. Plainly, Topknot was dead, or she would certainly have come home at meal-times. She was a great loss, as she came of a high family and was the handsomest of the brood. Mrs. Butler had been interviewed concerning her, and had answered sharply that she should not mourn greatly if the troublesome creature was never found.

It so happened, a few days afterward, that Mrs. Lane needed a cake pan of a certain size and shape which she did not possess, but she knew Mrs. Butler did; so she determined to ignore the little unpleasantness that existed, and run in the back way and borrow it. As she came along back through Mrs. Butler's woodshed, she noticed a basket of feathers. She paused a moment, looking intently at them, then murmured to herself, "Topknot's feathers, I do believe." Ah, indeed! What and if Topknot had met her destiny in Mrs. Butler's dinner-pot! And then a suspicion that had at times flitted vaguely through her mind, took shape and began to live. At dinner she half seriously mentioned the idea to her husband, and he answered,

"Pooh! As if Mrs. Butler was not able to buy all the chickens she needs, and more too."

"But those feathers! I would know those pretty gray and white feathers anywhere."

"Now, my dear, you don't suppose Topknot was the only hen in the world who owns a gray dress, do you? Farmers bring in hens and chickens every day with all sorts of feathers. Don't, for pity's sake, slip such a foolish thing to anybody else. It will be sure to get to her, and I would not let forty hens come between my friendship with such a woman—a little high-strung perhaps, but a good woman, after all. Then you must own that she has borne a great deal from Topknot. It would not be such a dreadful thing if she had boiled her up. It would be the only way of making sure that she would not be turning up again continually."

That afternoon Mrs. Lane took her work and went to sit an hour with Mrs. Ketchum. In the course of their neighbourly conference Mrs. Ketchum asked,

"Did it ever occur to you, Mrs. Lane, that Mrs. Butler was deceitful?"

"Why, no, I never thought she was. What makes you ask?"

"Oh, things I heard her saying about some of her neighbours that she is very thick with," said Mrs. Ketchum, looking mysteriously.

"What did she say?" Mrs. Lane asked, growing at once suspicious and interested.

"Well, I heard she said that she never had been more tormented in her life by anything than she had by your head, and that Mr. Butler talked of prosecuting your husband for damages."

"Suff and nonsense!" Mrs. Lane ejaculated, her anger kindling. "Everybody knows we keep our hens shut up. It is true poor Topknot strayed over there occasionally, but she is gone now, and if I didn't see her feathers in Mrs. Butler's woodshed, I'm much mistaken. At any rate, I know they had not pie for dinner about that time."

No sooner had these words escaped her lips than she was sorry she had said them.

"Is it possible?" said Mrs. Ketchum; "I always thought Mrs. Butler was a very queer woman—but—you don't say she—"

"Oh, no, I don't say anything. It is only some of my nonsense," Mrs. Lane said hurriedly, as she gathered up her work. "Don't mention it for anything. Good-bye, I must be going."

She did not notice the wide open eyes and ears with which Mary Ann, Mrs. Ketchum's servant, who was at that moment replenishing the grate with coal, took in every word, and much more than they were meant to convey, and who, on the first leisure opportunity, hastened to share such a choice bit of gossip with her dear friend, Ellen Bryan, who lived near. Ellen, in turn, related it to her mistress, by this time a much exaggerated and embellished account—how Mrs. Butler had stolen and killed and cooked one of Mrs. Lane's chickens; for "Mrs. Lane was as sure of it as she was that

she was alive, and, if 'twas her last breath, she'd say it, because she saw the feathers with her own eyes in Mrs. Butler's woodshed." Then Mrs. Morgan, her mistress, and a particular friend of Mrs. Butler's, forgot that terse utterance—"Where there is no tale-bearer the strife ceasesh." She put on her bonnet, straightway, and carried this absurd story to Mrs. Butler. "She was not fond of repeating gossip in general, but she thought it her duty, as a friend, to tell this, so that it might be contradicted at once." Strange how many good women Satan finds to help him carry out his plans!

And Mrs. Butler, though she had the reputation of being an excellent woman, consistent and foremost in every good word and work, was not proof against this most trying test. Her spirit took fire; she allowed her anger to wax hot, and she said many foolish and unkind things about Mrs. Lane, which she would not at all have believed one month ago, and did not believe now, for that matter. Mrs. Butler's weak point was her pride. Never had a word, to her knowledge, been breathed against her fair fame. And now to be accused of such small meanness—it was unbearable; it was beyond anything. Her sore heart verified the truth of the proverb—"The words of a tale-bearer are as wounds."

The spring-time unfolded leaves and blossoms, but the balmy airs and bright sunshine did not warm the hearts of the two women toward each other. Day after day passed, and yet, since that fatal day when they met at the fence, they had given no sign that each was aware of the other's existence.

It was inconvenient and forlorn in more ways than one—this breeze which the little hen had raised. It was trying to give up the neighbourly kindnesses that they had been wont to exchange. They had borrowed patterns and magazines and cake-pans and yeast, of one another. All the seldom-used utensils in one house were common property in both. Mrs. Butler's lap-board and scales and colander, and Mrs. Lane's carpet-stretcher and step-ladder, often changed places; and many a plate of cookies, or pan of biscuits, had travelled from one house to another, when either happened to have unusual good luck in baking. There were no more runnings to and fro between the houses, or cheery callings from each other's windows. The back gate was nailed up, and the east windows in one house and the west windows in the other had their blinds carefully closed. They had been wont to share their joys and troubles. They had made calls and afternoon visits in company. But now, one peeped through the blinds to make sure that the other was well on her way to sewing society before she would start; and, by degrees, their circle of friends began to understand the fact that Mrs. Butler and Mrs. Lane did not "speak."

Poor Mrs. Lane was consumed with vain regrets that she had, in her momentary vexation, allowed that slippery tongue of hers to make her so much trouble. Sometimes she was heartily ashamed of the whole thing, and would gladly have told Mrs. Butler so, only that she believed, whatever excuses or apologies she might make, the proud-spirited woman would never receive them. At other times she told herself that she did well to be angry; that of course Mrs. Butler had made away with her hen; it was not likely she had intended it—probably some of the family had stoned poor Topknot and lamed her so she had to be killed, and Mrs. Butler had thought they might as well have a dinner out of her, and nobody would be the wiser for it. It was, after all, not the loss of the hen she cared so much for, she argued with herself, as that Mrs. Butler should prove herself so unworthy; and then to crown it all by getting angry at her, when probably, after all, she had only hinted at the real truth to what she said to Mrs. Ketchum; and she to go on just as usual and put a bold face on the matter—it was too aggravating!

It is much more comfortable to blame other people than yourself. So Mrs. Lane silenced all inward condemnation of her mischief-making tongue, and began to pride herself on being a long-suffering woman, in that she had not brought the affair before the church, instead of preserving a magnanimous silence. What a stir she could make, to be sure!

It was strange how much bad feeling one small hen could occasion. Mrs. Ketchum was amazed to see Mrs. Lane sail past her on the street without so much as a nod. Mrs. Butler looked askance across the church at Mrs. Lane, and wondered how she could look the minister in the face while he took for his text, "Speak not evil one of another, brethren," and then painted in vivid words the sin of the slanderer. Then Mrs. Lane, in her turn, wondered how Mrs. Butler could have the face to take such a prominent part in church affairs, when she had such a sin on her conscience.

(To be continued.)

MARRIAGE IN CHINA.

Among the pure Chinese, and especially among the higher classes, the affair is a much longer and more serious one. From the old Turkish strictness with which females are secluded, it is comparatively rare that a couple see each other previous to betrothal, and still more so that there should be any acquaintance between them. This has given rise to the necessary employment of a character equivalent to the bazalan or marriage-broker of ancient Brittany, to Mr. Foy's Parisian Matrimonial Agency Office, or the daily marriage advertisements of our own papers. If your wish is for marriage in the abstract, the broker will find you a fitting partner first, and negotiate the transfer after. If you are less purely philosophical, and wish to consult your own tastes as well as the interests and increase of the nation, you are only to name the party, and the broker becomes your accredited ambassador. There is, however, one preliminary point to be ascertained. Has your intended the same surname as yourself? If so, it is a fatal difficulty, as the laws of China would not permit the marriage. If, however, she is Chun and you are Le, or she is Kwan or Yu, and you rejoice in any other patronymic monosyllable, the next step is for the broker to obtain from each a tablet containing the name, age, date and hour of birth, etc. These are then taken to a diviner and compared, to see if the union promises happiness; if the answer is favourable