

THE ALAMANCE GLEANER.

VOL 4

GRAHAM, N. C.,

TUESDAY APRIL 9 1878

NO. 6

THE GLEANER

PUBLISHED WEEKLY BY
E. S. PARKER

Graham, N. C.

Rates of Subscription, Postage Paid:
One Year \$1.00
Six Months .75
Three Months .50

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Transient advertisements payable in advance; yearly advertisements quarterly in advance

	1 m.	2 m.	3 m.	6 m.	12 m.
1 square	\$2.00	\$3.00	\$4.00	\$6.00	\$10.00
2 "	\$3.00	\$4.00	\$5.00	\$7.00	\$15.00

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ONLY A FARMER'S WIFE.

BY WILKIE VAN.

[From The Sunny South.]

'John can you spare me a dollar this morning?' asked Mrs. Larcom, in a faltering voice, and with downcast eyes, as she followed her husband to the door as he started to his day's work.

Her voice and manner involuntarily betrayed her fear of a refusal, and one could see at a glance she was accustomed to a lecture when asking for money, or worse still, to have it given grudgingly.

'Well, I suppose so, he replied; and slowly thrusting his hand into his pocket, drew out a well worn leather pocket book, and opening it, selected a ragged bill and extended it to his wife.

A flush came into her pale cheeks, her eyes were lifted to his with a sparkle in their blue depths, as she said joyfully:

'Oh, thank you, dear! I was so afraid you'd refuse; but it actually makes me shiver to look at the bare front yard; my heart was so set on the flower seeds, and—'

'Flower seeds?' he cried, aghast; 'you don't mean to say you wanted to throw a dollar away on flower seeds? I thought you wanted to buy the milk pans you spoke of last night.'

The glad light died out in the blue eyes, and the flush deepened on the thin cheek, and the low voice trembled as she said:

'Oh, John, I thought you knew! I told you about it yesterday, and Myrtle Cloud says I can send my order to Vick with hers, she is going to send ten dollars for seeds and evergreens.'

'Well, if Myrtle Cloud is disposed to throw her money away buying trash, that is no reason I should throw mine away, and I don't intend to; I wish you'd remember you are only a farmer's wife, and every dollar I have is dug out of the ground by hard labor. Flower seeds indeed! women now-a-days think of nothing but foolishness.'

'There, John, don't say anymore,' she faltered, in a choked voice, her lips trembling like a grieved child's. 'I thought maybe you wouldn't mind; and the place is so desolate; not a picture or book inside, nor a flower outside.'

'Books and flowers—fiddle sticks! I think you have enough housework to keep you employed without wasting time on flowers and novels, and such trumpery—my mother is a happy woman, and a useful one, too, and I'll go bail she never read a novel or dug in a flower bed in her life. No, keep the money,' he said, replying to the motion of her hand, 'and buy the milk pans with it; it won't be thrown away; in them there is some comfort.'

He settled his hat on his head with a jerk, thrust his purse into his pocket, and strode away to where several 'hired men' were harnessing their plow horses, and a moment later his voice reached his wife's ears as he gave directions for the day's work, mingled with sharp taps, taps of his hammer as he adjusted 'heel screw' and 'clevis pin,' with the skill of an experienced farmer.

She stood watching his brisk movements until her vision was obscured by a tearful mist, and slowly turning, she threw herself into a low cane-seated rocker, and gave way to the luxury of a 'good cry.'

John Larcom was designated by his neighbors as a 'forehanded fellow; sharp and quick in trade, close and saving with his money, yet prompt in meeting his bills as they became due. By close application and unswerving industry, he had succeeded in lifting the heavy mortgages that encumbered the farm left him by his father, and now at the end of five years he held his deeds free of mortgage, and had a snug sum deposited in bank for a 'rainy day,' he said.

He had united experience and sound, practical common sense with the 'scientific farming' taught now-a-days in books; many of them contain-

ing thoughts and suggestions of price—less value to farmers of discernment, while others are written by soft-palm-ed idlers, and brought before the great farming world with a mighty flourish of trumpets. Many an amateur farmer has bewailed his folly in trusting to those high-sounding theories, and to his chagrin and infinite disgust has discovered at the end of a year's experimenting that the expense of scientific tools and chemical compounds, leaves him empty pockets.

John Larcom was a farmer's son, had been educated on a farm, and was by nature, extremely practical and so found little difficulty in separating the grains of true merit from the great mass of chaff found in the volumes of scientific farmer's lore.

These books and the country newspaper embraced his entire fund of literature; and he thought it contemptible in a man, and frivolous in a woman, to possess a taste for fiction.

He was regarded as a 'lucky fellow' when he was married to pretty blue-eyed Lucy Dean, the daughter of the most successful farmer in his district, and prospective heiress of her father's fertile acres.

John thought with great complacency of the snug little fortune his wife would inherit, and gazed with an air of proprietorship across the well-tilled fields of billowy wheat, and rustling corn, and of cotton, whose rows were turned on hillside and bottom land, with geometrical precision.

He even thought of making a few needless additions to his house and furniture, 'just to please Lucy,' but—

'The best laid plans of men and mice Gang oft to agley.' for the honey moon had scarcely reached its zenith when his father-in-law was stricken with paralysis; and after a few weeks lingering death-in-life, quietly breathed his last.

John was inconsolable at the loss of his kind father; and John, while sincerely regretting the old man's sudden death, could not refrain from mentally congratulating himself on the speedy possession of one of the most valuable farms in the county; but to his dismay, creditors came forward, one after another, with claims against the estate amounting to almost its full value.

John loved his wife, but there was a vein of selfishness in his heart, and he thought, almost unconsciously that he had been duped into matrimony under false appearances.

Mrs. Larcom thought of his expectations and his disappointments as she sat gently rocking, and in her loyal heart exonerated him from all blame.

'Oh, dear,' she said at last, starting up; 'this will never do! But I'm just ready to give right up. John and I never can see alike. What delight him is weary, hard drudgery to me; but if I could brighten up the place just a little I would be so happy. Scrub, scrub, cook and sew from Monday morning till Saturday night; work, work, work all day, and go to bed at night so tired I can't rest. And the days are all alike, crowded so with work and try as hard as ever I can, I never do dove tail it all in, but hurry so I do nothing well, and leave out my duties entirely. The fault is in me; it must be; but I do try, oh, so earnestly! John's mother must be a remarkable woman, but I do hate for him to compare me with her so often! I will spade up the beds and plant the seeds Aunt Pattie promised to give me, and train morning glories over the front porch.'

She hung up the leather duster she had been vigorously brushing over the well worn chairs and tables, and re-arranged the plain furniture, imparting a cozy, home like grace to the bare rooms with her dexterous fingers and artist's eyes.

When the rooms were all tidy and freshly swept and aired, she tied her on her ruffled and fluted little sun-bonnet and ran down the steps into the yard, and was soon deeply engaged in the fascinating work of preparing the soil for a prospective flower garden.

'It wasn't so bad, after all,' she mused; 'there will be one comfort in Aunt Pattie's flower seeds—I shall

not be afraid of pronouncing the names of her flowers, nor make such a blunder as Nettie Jones did last summer when she called columbine, a quill-ley, etc.' And the florist's seeds might prove unsatisfactory, after all.'

But she worked with a half guilty feeling of disobedience, as she knew her husband would regard her work as wasted time and energy. He had never reproached Lucy for her father's improvidence, but she knew when he made covert allusions to his 'small income,' and the necessity of 'rigid economy,' he was thinking of changed prospects; and the meekly submitted to be guided by his stronger will, and uncomplainingly fell into the dull routine of domestic duties which he religiously thought the real aim and object of woman's life.

Lucy, fragile as a hot house plant, and sensitive to every chilling breath of neglect or indifference, keenly felt the change in the atmosphere of her husband's house, accustomed as she had been to a never changing temperature of love and appreciation in her father's home.

But like most clinging natures, she loved her husband sincerely, and earnestly endeavored to reach his impossible wifely standard.

As Lucy's prospective fortune had been ruthlessly swept aside, like the 'baseless fabric of a dream,' he no longer felt the desire, or ability, to beautify his plain country farm house for her occupancy. She thought with intense longing, of the many elegant things she could create with her own skillful fingers, if John could only let her have a little money. But he had a profound contempt for 'woman's gimmeracks,' and positively refused any aid toward the furtherance of her cherished schemes.

Once, as he came suddenly into the house, he found her bending with absorbed attention over a borrowed volume of 'Beautiful Homes; or Hints in Tasteful Housefurnishing.' He took the book, glanced over its pages and with the tone of a judge pronouncing sentence of death, inquired the name of the owner; and without expressing his opinion of the uselessness of such an absurd work, called for a boy at work in the garden, and dispatched it to its owner.

Not that he meant to be unkind, he secretly thought it his duty to keep a strict espionage over his wife, for he regarded her as little more than a child; and he reasoned, 'are not books of fiction, like French bons-bons, however pleasing to the taste, sure to leave a vitiated appetite? And does not Lucy grow more finicky day by day? Oh, farmers in our beautiful sunny land; do you ever pause to consider why the winsome girls you so eagerly woo, so soon exchange their bonny, sprightly ways for an air of listless apathy? Or why the peach bloom complexions so early change and fade—and why the bright eyes become dim and assume a lack-lustre expression, enlarged and sunken as they too often are by ill health, and surrounded by bistre circles that overshadow the pale cheeks—have you ever given one moment's thought to the weary, almost hopeless lives they live as 'farmers' wives? Have you ever thought of the endless tasks they daily accomplish? Most of them trifles, you think; and granting them to be trifles, is not the world composed of 'trifles'? Is not the atmosphere formed of minute atoms? Yet you would deem it no 'trifle' to be deprived of air!

You living as men having eyes, yet see not. For once, open your eyes to the destiny your wives are forced to accept—look at the inconvenient, cheerless places, it would seem a sacrilege to designate by the holy word home—your wives spend their lives in.

Do you ever think how infinitely you could lighten the burdens of the one being you have chosen from all the world as your companion and your friend? Do you have the faintest idea what torture it is to a true woman to live the isolated life, seemingly inseparable from farming interests? You think, perhaps, it is a 'waste of time' to pay and receive visits; but as the brightest metal will grow dim from disuse, so the human mind can be kept polished and bright only by coming in contact with other minds, and it is the duty of every farmer to provide social amusements for his family. Make your homes attractive, provide books and music for your wives and daughters to beguile some of the tediousness of long winter evenings; and regard money well spent that adds to the comfort and happiness of your families.

Mrs. Larcom continued her work; now spading, now exchanging the long handled unwieldy spade for a still more unwieldy mattock, now leveling and smoothing with a patent cotton, or 'time hoe,' and pausing now and then to view with an air of satisfaction the narrow bed she had so laboriously thrown up.

'What on earth are you doing Lucy?' asked a voice from the front door, so suddenly she dropped the spade, and lifted a face flushed with exercise to see her husband standing in the door, broad brimmed hat in hand.

'I thought I would fix the beds and sow the seeds Aunt Pattie has for me; that will be better than none you know.'

'That spading is too heavy for your strength,' he said, 'Wait until I'm at leisure and I'll fix the beds for you.'

'But the seeds must be planted soon if they are to come to perfection next summer,' she replied with a sigh, for she knew how indefinite was his 'leisure time.'

'I came by the house to let you know there will be two extra hands to prepare dinner for; and hurry dinner Lucy—from the way the clouds drift, I expect rain to-night, and I must get the ground bedded up in the meadow field this afternoon.'

She glanced regretfully at the half finished borders, then hurried into house, kindled a fire in the stove, drew water and began preparing the meats, vegetables, etc., for cooking.

And now as the excitement of working in the open air subsided, she became conscious of a dull, heavy pain in her side, which became almost unbearable before the dinner was served.

She occupied her seat at the table, but made no pretence of eating, but quietly and almost in silence administered to the wants of her husband and the hired men seated at the table.

'Are you sick Lucy?' suddenly enquired Mr. Larcom as he extended his plate for a fresh supply of pudding, and noticing for the first time, and with a queer little quiver in his heart, how pale and thin she had grown.

'Only a pain in my side,' she replied.

'I told you to let that yard alone,' he said in a half peevish tone. The next thing you know you will be in bed sick; and I'd be almost ruined if you should have a spell while I'm in such a push with the spring planting!'

'I'll be all right again when I get rested,' she said, the ghost of a smile flickering over her pale face.

'Well, let that yard alone, if you were compelled to dig, you had better have cotton planted in the yard as cotton is the 'money weed' you know. And Lucy, be sure that you have supper ready when the hands come from the field.'

So saying he hurried after the men who had already returned to work.

She began gathering the dishes together, and heaping them in the bright tin dish pan, pausing now and then to press her hand to her side, through which ever and anon darted an excruciating pain through her ribs but labor and patience will overcome most things in life—and few men's wives an indulgence in the luxury of working only when they feel like it.

'Now,' she sighed as she folded the tablecloth in its original creases, 'I can take a moments breath! But not in the house; sometimes I feel as if confinement, day after day in these close rooms is positive martyrdom.'

She slipped off the porch and passed through the little back gate into the orchard where the blossom draped trees were scattered like the 'pitched tents of an army,' and the soft hazy clouds seemed bending to throw a silvery veil over the flower-crowned earth; and droning bee, and sinless bird, were chanting and carolling a hymn of praise to Nature and to Nature's God.

'This is breathing! this is living!' she cried. 'I am half intoxicated with sweets. Oh, what a happy, care-free life the Gipsies must live in the woods, free to bark, in God's sunshine without a thought of neglected duties to mar their perfect enjoyment.'

fastened them to her throat.

The tired feet and aching side were almost forgotten now, for she was invigorated with the tonic of beauty. She seated herself where a group of cherry trees formed a kind of arbor, and the light wind drifted the snowy petals over her and fanned her cheek till a soft color crept into it.

Farmer's wives and daughters can never complain of want of exercise but work taken in doors, fighting dust and cooking over heated stoves is not the kind of exercise needed for health. Exercise in fresh, pure air, with surroundings that amuse and refresh the mind. The lack of this is what causes the prematurely faded cheek and the lack-lustre eye of so many farmer's wives.

Mrs. Larcom sat lost in a dreamy reverie until recalled by the quick, impatient voice of her husband.

She hurried to the house and found him standing on the porch with a roll of coarse cloth in his hand.

'Lucy,' he said: 'I want you to make some new back bands this evening; two of the old ones have given out—and I must have these to-morrow—have them made by night and I'll fasten the hooks on.'

She cut and shaped the bands and hastily began stitching them; and as she leaned over her sewing the pain in her side grew more intense, until her nervous fingers, could scarcely force the large needle through the thick folds.

She rose at last and with difficulty tottered to the bed, across which she fell in an unconscious state—and so her husband found her on his return from work.

He had gone into the stove-room and to his surprise round the stove cold and no preparations for supper visible, and his wife no where to be seen. He was at first surprised, but when no response was made to his call, became alarmed and on going to her room found her lying apparently lifeless—her face white, and her brow bathed with cold moisture. He gazed at her a moment as if stupefied.

'Oh my God!' he gasped his face only a shade less pale than the one he gathered to his bosom and pressed to his heart. 'Speak to me Lucy; oh Lucy what ails you? Open your eyes and speak to me?'

In his agony he rained kisses on the lips that had never spoken 'save in love and tenderness to all his impatience and faint finding.

'Maybe she's only fainted sir,' said one of the men who followed him 'I'd better go for the doctor.'

'Yes go at once,' he replied, catching at the crumb of comfort suggested by the man.

Mr. Larcom laid his wife tenderly on the bed and administered such restoratives as his small experience suggested, but without any perceptible advantage.

In an hour the doctor came, and after examining her pulse, and listening for the beatings of her heart turned a grave face to her husband.

'How long has she been in this state?' he asked.

'I came to the house at three o'clock and she was in her usual health then—but when we came to supper found her as you see her. Oh, Doctor you you don't think she's dead?'

'No she is not dead; but she will not recover soon, if ever she mentally added. 'Send for some woman to attend her—and you had better dispatch for your mother as she has none, poor girl.'

And then he added: 'This attack is no more than I expected. I warned her a month ago that she was tasking her strength beyond endurance.'

'Overtasking her strength?' Larcom repeated in a surprised voice. 'You don't think—'

He paused for the words of the Dr. suggested a possibility to his awakened sensibility that appaled him.

'Yes, John, I think she's over-worked; and if she recovers it will be as by a miracle; these are hard words but hard words break no bones, my friend. I told her a month ago unless she had assistance in her work she would be on my hands.'

'She never told me,' Mr. Larcom said. 'I have been blind beyond forgiveness.'

With a sigh that was almost a groan he covered his face with his hands.

Awakened memory recalled the

[Continued on fourth page.]