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“THE TRAGEDY OF THE FARMER’S WIFE.”

It seems to be characteristic of some people to judge country life by its worst features, and city life by its best. The truth is that the very poor family in the country lives a very great deal better than the very poor family in the city. Any man who has seen something of the conditions surrounding the tenement dwellers and the poorer factory workers knows this to be a fact. The city has its big bankers and big manufacturers, but so has the country its big plantation-owners and ranchmen. The poor we have always with us, both in town and country, but rural suffering never reaches so acute a point as urban suffering.

It is our conviction, therefore, that the magazines have seriously over-drawn their pictures of “the tragedy of the farmer’s wife.” Certainly the writer does not recognize these haggard, despairing, and mistreated women as typical of the farmers’ wives he has known, who were of his kindred, and among whom he was reared. These farm women whom he knew, and loved and honored, these folk of whom Stevenson wrote:

“In the highlands, in the country places,
Where the old plain men have rosy faces,
And the young fair maidens quiet eyes”—

they indeed, like the virtuous woman praised by King Lemuel, ate not the bread of idleness and worked with their hands, but like her they worked “willingly,” and they were, to our mind, far finer types of women and far happier in their love-inspired toil, hard as it was, than the idle society woman of the city who wastes her life in a round of meaningless card parties and social frivolities, petty jealousies, and in that extravagant dressing against which her unpaid merchants’ bills and dressmakers’ bills often cry out with Banquo-like insistence. Away down in their hearts there is not one of these fashionable parasites but feels the emptiness of it all, not one but has a vague and gnawing consciousness that life was given for some higher purpose—that it was meant to count for something, as theirs do not. Hence, the “unrest” of which one hears so much, the ennui which vents itself in unwholesome outbreaks and runs distractedly after strange new gods, “the nervous distress which has become universal,” as an eminent medical authority was quoted as saying in *The Progressive Farmer* a week or two ago, and which he declared threatens the physical stamina and even the permanence of our race.

The country woman has her hardships—more of them than she ought to have, as we shall point out later—but it should not be forgotten that the normal and wholesome aspirations of a woman’s heart are more atune with the ideals of the country today than with those of our fashion-mad cities. If the country woman works hard, it is for those she loves. Her heart makes music that strengthens her hands. No uncaring boss watches her all day, standing beside some counter or some factory-machine while she wears her life out-at tasks done only for the money that they bring. The clothes she sews on are to be worn by her own rosy-cheeked boys and girls, not sold for so much silver to men and women who will not even know of her existence. Knowing that the food she cooks will nourish the bodies of those who love her, makes it an entirely different operation from that it would be if love for those it served did not lighten the drudgery. And if nightfall finds her weary, or sickness or age rob her of strength, there is regard from those in whose service she has spent herself, instead of the indifference with which the business world treats all machines, human and mechanical, when their efficiency fails. Such

complications in the life of the farmer’s wife are not to be lightly considered.

Nevertheless, while protesting as we do against the pathetic caricatures of the country woman, we do wish to urge as strongly as we know how, that the average farmer does not yet provide as many of the conveniences and as many labor-saving tools for his wife as he uses in his own farm work.

This is a reform we must now bring about. If the farm woman for her part measures up to the high ideals of industry and faithfulness set forth by King Lemuel, she is also entitled to the reward which that ancient sage ascribes to her:

“Her children rise up and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praiseth her. . . . Give her of the fruit of her hands.”

Certainly, the husband’s praise must be hollow indeed, a mere mockery, if he fails to find expression-in furnishing the comforts that will lighten her tasks and her heart. “Give her of the fruits of her hands.” She has earned jointly with her husband the property that the family owns; she is entitled to part of it to buy such helps as she needs.

That these conveniences are not already provided on a great number of farms, is partly due, we believe, to the fact that these labor-saving appliances for the women on the farm have not been so well advertised and exploited as the labor-saving implements and machinery used by the men on the farm. This is one reason why every State should have institutes for farm women as well as farmers’ institutes—institutes in which not only do speakers, women and men, give instruction in the scientific principles and practical problems involved in housekeeping, cooking, or sanitation, but where the most improved modern conveniences are exhibited and explained.

Meanwhile, however, the women of the farms should themselves begin agitating for the improved appliances they need, and urge their importance upon the men of their households. In every case, of course, strength considered, there should be an equal distribution between husband and wife of the burdens that each ought to bear, and also an equal distribution of the comforts they are able to purchase. In short, the housekeeper’s work as well as the farmer’s can be made easier and more effective, and it is the duty of the farmer and his wife to work together in bringing this about, and thus to relieve country life of much unnecessary hardship.

FEATURES OF THIS ISSUE.

A TRIP TO THE “LAND OF THE SKY”—A Charming Vacation Story	8
CAN YOU WRITE A GOOD LETTER?—An Offer to Our Boys and Girls	7
FERTILIZING PEANUTS ON SANDY LAND—Phosphoric Acid and Lime are Needed	3
LONG-STAPLE COTTON—Some Advice to Beginners by an Experienced Grower	17
PLANTING THE TOBACCO CROP—Timely Talk on a Big Subject	18
PREVENTING SORE SHOULDERS—How Your Horse Suffers From Your Carelessness	13
SAVE MOISTURE NOW—How to Go About It	6
TAXATION PROBLEMS—Some Needed Changes in Our Present System	11
THE BIG PROBLEM OF MARKETING—Three Points of View	5
THREE COTTON FOLLIES—They Cost Us Millions of Dollars Each Year, Yet We Repeat Them	10
WHY NOT HAVE A SILO?—It Will Pay You	4, 12