

Friend of the Farm Wife

Among the many tributes paid to Herbert Quick, one is especially characteristic of this notable and kindly Iowan — “he had a tremendous capacity for loving the whole human scene and its natural background.” Only a cursory acquaintance with the many and varied interests of Mr. Quick will bring a realization of the fittingness of such a characterization. A more thorough study of his life and works confirms this feeling, and also establishes the conviction that if there was any one part of the human scene and its natural background that he loved more than another, it was that part in which rural life was predominant. Indeed, more specifically it seems that the women and children in the rural scene held a special place in his thoughts and affection, not only because he wanted to see life made easier and happier for them for their own sake, but also because he believed this was vital to the life of our country.

This latter idea he expressed in these impressive lines: “The pride of the nation once lay in its sturdy farmers. From their ranks came our statesmen, our scholars, our financiers. The

farmers fought our battles and built our railroads and bridges. They have been the soldiers of progress. And unless we can still maintain a farm life in which the greatnesses of American life can flower, the armies of progress will suffer that decadence which comes to the hosts of any nation when they come from pavements instead of from meadows and plowed fields. The farm woman must bear these oncoming hosts of strong men, or they will not be borne. And unless the farm women can live under conditions which make for happiness, health and pride, our whole nation will be weakened."

That it pays to make the women happy was one of Herbert Quick's firm convictions. He believed that it paid to emancipate slaves, and "especially when those slaves are our wives, our mothers, our daughters." Throughout his writings dealing with rural life, and these constitute the greater part of his literary work, there are almost innumerable references to the hard and unsatisfying life led by the women on the farms. As a boy on an Iowa farm during the years immediately following the Civil War, he had seen much of poverty, hardship, and heartbreaking disappointment; as an agricultural journalist, he spent much of his time visiting and investigating the farms in the Middle West and over the United States as a

whole. These experiences, backed by his knowledge of the life his mother, sisters, and women neighbors lived, led him to the conclusion that men on farms were much more contented and happy than were the women. He was also convinced that the prizes of progress and invention were going to the man of the farm and that, in this respect, the women had not received a fair deal. Against this he protested. Any farm that could afford a silo, a cream separator, or well-equipped barns could afford a bathroom, a washing machine, and other modern conveniences that make the home a good place for a woman to live, work, and raise her children, and thus develop in her the love for farm life.

In his book *The Fairview Idea* (1919), which is "a story of the new rural life", Herbert Quick told of a farmer who retired to a nearby town. One reason was his wife's poor health; years of hard work had been too much for her. "Every day she had carried many buckets of water from the well, and if the windmill didn't happen to be going she had pumped it herself. Her husband had built a concrete drinking tank for the cattle; all they had to do was to come and drink what they wanted. But for the woman who was his partner in life, he had provided nothing but an iron pump handle and a gravel path. . . . He

had money enough to build the finest farmhouse in the county, but he was so busy farming that he hadn't the time to build a home in which he and his family could be comfortable. A man doesn't feel the need of a good house as much as a woman does; he doesn't have to work in it."

Whenever the author referred to this position of the women on the farms, he emphasized the idea that the farmer's wife was not discontented with her husband nor with this treatment of her. She might even in some cases throw the weight of her vote against expenditures necessary to emancipate her from unnecessary drudgery. The mortgage on the farm was a nightmare as baleful to her as to her husband. She knew his business and was as solicitous as he for management that would bring profit.

Following the turn of the century, however, a farm wife here and there saw that the whole scheme of family life would fall to ruin if the rural homes suffered in comparison with the homes of those friends and relatives who lived on wages in town. She and her husband were coming to realize that it does not pay to build the farm up into a profitable property which is despised by the very children for whom they were giving their lives. When the tired and harassed farm wife comes to the point of asking herself whether it is worthwhile to

stay on the farm, she thinks secondarily of the disadvantages of work and living which have frazzled her nerves and depressed her spirits. She thinks first of her children. "That," said Herbert Quick, "is the Eternal Mother". "I can stand it", she says, "but I want my daughters to live where they will have better advantages".

That the farm wife had not been entirely without relief from the march of progress, Mr. Quick acknowledged in an article entitled "Women on the Farms", published in the October, 1913, issue of *Good Housekeeping*. The invention of cream separators and the establishment of creameries had freed her from some of the drudgery of the old-fashioned dairy farm. She no longer made cheese because the cheese factory can do it better and more cheaply. Labor-saving machinery had decreased the number of ravenous mouths she was expected to feed. These things helped her, however, because they were introduced as profitable innovations and not as woman-saving ones. Additional conveniences and devices would continue to come to the farm for the same reasons, the author predicted.

That a movement for better things among farm women was gaining headway was Mr. Quick's opinion at that time. They were determined to remain no longer in the rôle of the old-fashioned

wife "who washed and mopped, and baked and brewed, and spun a run and went a-visiting in the afternoons." This movement on the part of the farm wives to create a more satisfying rural home life and thus build a stronger rural morale, Mr. Quick found to be characterized by "a demand for happiness and ease and the fruits of progress in the house as well as out of it."

If a vote could be taken of the farmers' wives of the nation as to the improvement most generally needed in the home, Mr. Quick believed the referendum would be overwhelmingly in favor of running water in the house. When the country woman is visited by her town cousin, she hates to have that running water skeleton in the closet, that ghost that rises up when friends from the city are considered as visitors. There have been very good civilizations in which bathing facilities were confined to ponds and streams, the author acknowledged, but, he continued, "that is not our type of civilization; we have taught the bath as an appurtenance to civilization. It may be a reflection on our ancestors to make bathrooms an essential to self-respect, for many of them lived clean lives and died in the odor of sanctity. But, that was before the age of extensive advertising of bathtubs and the discovery of bacteria; before plumbers were found in every village. If we only

knew, we should find millions of farm people and folks of farm parentage who have been floated away from the countryside on currents of hot and cold water running into town and city residences."

A second duty which he frequently mentioned as being almost as objectionable to the farm wife as the carrying of water into the house was the cleaning of kerosene lamps. In "The New Farm Wife", published in the *Ladies' Home Journal* in April, 1919, Mr. Quick wrote that the city cousin "may flood her home with electric light by pressing a button, or at worst, go from fixture to fixture lighting the gas. But she has no smell of oil on her hands, no cleaning of lamps, no lack of light". And the new farm wife in *The Fairview Idea* demanded "a central lighting system to relieve me of the disgusting and never-ending task of filling, cleaning and lighting kerosene lamps".

During the second decade of the twentieth century, the women on the farms became increasingly aware that many of the conveniences enjoyed by the women in city homes were possibilities on any farm and, while expense might be a barrier, it frequently was not an insurmountable one, particularly when the husband would give sympathetic coöperation.

The American farm women constitute our largest class of economically useful women, Mr.

Quick believed. This is shown by the fact that marriage is regarded as a burden by the poor man in the city, but is almost a necessity for the poor man who works a farm. "The poultry products of the nation are worth as much as the cotton crop, exceed the wheat crop by \$400,000,000 yearly, and are worth more than the combined values of the oat, rye, barley and potato crops", Herbert Quick wrote in 1919. This enormous product if lost to us would be felt ruinously at once in an increased cost of living. It must be credited mainly to the woman on the farm, for it is she who produces nine-tenths of the poultry products — the fowls and eggs — of the nation.

"Give her credit also", proposed Mr. Quick, "for butter, cheese, vegetables, pickles, preserves and a thousand other things. Allow her, too, her share in preparing the meals for the men who grow the rest of the food for us, and for keeping their houses. Remember, also, that she bears our sturdiest children while she helps to feed us all. And then ask yourself who has done anything for the farm woman. She has been left to shift for herself and must still do so. She still bakes her own bread, scrubs her own floors, washes her own dishes, cans, preserves and dries her own fruits and vegetables. She has bent faithfully, dutifully, uncomplainingly over these tasks."

In some of his discussions of rural life, Herbert Quick wrote that the women of the cities complain that they have lost their economic usefulness in the household and demand a share in the productive work of the world. "No such wail ever arises from the women on the farm; their hands are full of necessary and productive work from morning till night, and in large measure this work is done without the modern aids to housework which city women possess".

That the farm wife was asking for and receiving to an increasing degree the conveniences and advantages enjoyed by the city housewife was evident to the author during the later years of his life. Moreover, she was no longer content to have these improvements confined to her own home and family; she was working for a better and fuller community life for herself, her children, her husband, and her neighbors. Societies and clubs were being organized. "Thousands of farm women were studying where they formerly succumbed; advancing where they formerly retreated." That the work was only begun he well realized, but because the farm wife was asking and receiving aids to her work, and because in some sections rural isolation was "giving way to socialization, intellectual barrenness to fertility", and neighborhoods were becoming integrated

again, Mr. Quick believed there was cause to feel encouraged and hopeful concerning the conditions under which the farm wife of the future would carry on her work.

“The World War taught us the meaning of morale — the way people feel about things”, wrote this staunch and understanding friend of agriculture. “Destroy the morale of an army and it will run from its shadow. The morale of the rural population began to suffer when cities began offering women and children a better chance in the world than seemed attainable in the country. It is for the new farm wife to restore rural morale; to do so she needs the assistance of the rest of the community to get rid of those things that affect the general tone of feeling with regard to rural life”, he argued, for this generation “knows that the fate of a community and the nation depends upon better living conditions on the farm”.

Perhaps no more fitting conclusion could be given to a discussion of Herbert Quick's very deep and sincere interest in the well-being of the farm wife than to quote his tribute not only to her but to all womankind. In restoring the rural morale the new farm wife “will be doing what women have always done — look after the welfare of the race”.

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