

[Sarah Wall]

Wake Forest Cotton Mill

Wake Forest, N. C.

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I. L. M.

SARAH WALL

About a mile from Wake Forest College and a quarter of a mile west from Faculty Drive there is a ramshackle eight-room house which serves as a home for four families. The house is the only one in its row which belongs to the near-by cotton mill. A railroad track bordered on each side by overgrown weed patches separates it from kindred houses which furnish homes for other mill workers. Cheap curtains of varied design flap against the ledges of the big, unscreened and shadeless windows and seem to accentuate a desolation they were meant to conceal.

The unfinished appearance of the house makes one wonder just for a second when the carpenters will return to complete their job. That thought does not linger. Obviously the carpenters have long since passed it by. It stands there now weary with a hardening and graceless age which has made of it a shell enclosing the daily activities of fifteen people.

Within three of these rooms Sarah and Johnnie Wall and their six children live. It was Sarah who invited me into the old house the other day when I knocked on the front door. I followed her into the first of her three 2 small rooms and sat down in the only sturdy-looking chair she had. Sarah seated herself on the bed which had been that morning stripped of its covering.

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"I'm sorry you ketched me so dirty," she said, "but even if I'd knowed you was coming I don't know as it woulder made any difference. I've washed all day long and I said I'd stop and rest awhile if I never got anything else done."

Sarah was barefooted and her run-over shoes lay in the corner where she had kicked them when they had begun to hurt her feet early that morning. Her old brown cotton dress was ringed with sudsy water from the wash tub. All of her looked tired except her eyes. Their mild brightness gave to her the undaunted appearance of a Millet peasant.

The room swarmed with flies. It was dirty but there was no evidence of accumulated uncleanness. The three-year old child who lay on the small bed in the corner knocked fretfully at the flies which lighted on his dirty face. His older sister had put him to bed just as he was when he came in from play. He is ill with whooping-cough and his coughing interrupted Sarah frequently as she talked with me.

"I was born out in the country in this very county 34 year ago," she began, "and my Pa ran a saw mill. He 3 cut lumber up in what they call the Harricanes, and made fairly well but there was ten of us at home to provide for. He moved to the cotton mill so's some of the older ones could find work.

"Pa died when I was ten year old and Ma died when I was twelve. I stayed then with one of my older married sisters who was here at this mill. I had to go to work in the mill to make my livin' and there was no more time for schoolin'.

"When I was sixteen year old me and Johnnie married. Since then I've worked between the times when I wasn't havin' children. Johnnie worked one shift and I worked the other so's one of us would always be here with the children. I done the cookin' and the housekeepin', too, such as was done.

"I've worked none atall now for the past three months. When the mill went on one shift I was cut off. I told my husband the other day I reckon it was just as well because I was so

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near wore out I probably couldner stood the work through the hot summer anyhow. They're workin' 'em like mules down there in the spinnin' room. I know some that's had to quit. They say they'd just as soon perish to death as work themselves to death.

“The mill closed down last December and when it started again in January it run a week and stopped a 4 week. Three months ago it started up full time but just one shift a day. That throwed some out of work altogether. John had been makin' \$15 a week as second hand in the spinnin' room on the shift that was out off. Since then he's been doin' odd jobs about the mill and they pay him eight dollars a week.”

Sarah's baby, a pudgy-looking child of eighteen months, toddled into the room and clutched at his mother's knee. She took him into her arms and for a minute forgot that I was present.

“Out of that eight dollars you have to pay rent, clothe, and feed your family?” I asked.

“I've got a garden and it helps some,” Sarah answered. “The beetle bugs has been bad this year and just about ruined my snaps but I've got butter beans yet.

“Summer we've been able to live through but what we'll do when winter comes the Lord only knows. They's four in school and they've got to have coats and shoes. I'll be bound to find work somewhere. I want them children to stay in school till they finish high school. Then they'll be able to find somethin' to do besides work in a cotton mill.”

Sarah looked up at me and there was an increased brightness about her eyes as she added slowly, “I hope never to see a youngun I've got go in the mill for even one day's work.”

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“Why?” I asked.

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“Because it's unhealthy work and it wears you out before yore time. Not gettin' enough money to live decent don't help yore health neither. Do you reckon I can buy milk for this crowd on what John's gettin? Well, I do try to get a pint a day for them two least ones but that aint enough. Now and then the others get some canned milk sweetened up with sugar. They like it and it's cheaper then fresh milk but I caint buy much of that. Doctors can tell you to buy milk for your children but that don't help none if you don't have the money to pay for it.”

“You have so many children to buy for,” I said.

“More than we've got any business with,” Sarah replied promptly. “I told Johnnie when the last one was born that I thought it was a pure sin for people to have so many children when they caint half-way provide for 'em. Such things don't seem to bother men like they do women, though.”

The baby in the small bed began to choke with phlegm and Sarah walked swiftly across the room to raise his head while he coughed. A fetching little girl of five came into the room gnawing on a green apple. She edged up close to my chair and stood grinning at me until her mother seated herself again on the bed.

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Mrs. Pearce to goin' to get you if you don't leave her apples alone,” Sarah said to the child.

“I never got but two,” the child replied, smiling at her mother.

“She's the one that liked to died with pneumonia year before last,” Sarah explained to me. “She was sick for so long I think we sorter spoilt her. For forty-one days she was at Rex Hospital and long after she come home she had to stay in bed. Me and him both was workin' and it was a good thing. We never coulder got the \$150 hospital bill paid off with just one workin'. If there'd been a doctor bill after she was brought home I don't know what woulder become of us. For four or five year we've been on Dr. Timberlake's list. Every

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week eighty cent of John's pay goes to Dr. Timberlake. He charges ten cent a head, you know. Then, when we need him he comes and there's no regular doctor bill to pay."

"You are still able to pay 89¢ a week out of John's eight-dollar wages?" I asked.

"We aint able to," Sarah replied. Then with a little bitter smile she added, "But we aint able not to either. Run on out to play, Nancy," she said suddenly to the child who was still gnawing on her apple.

Soon after, Sarah's fifteen and thirteen year old daughters came into the room. "We've got seven more pieces of candy to sell, Mama," the oldest one said.

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"Then you'uns both will have money enough to go to the show?" Sarah wanted to know.

"Yessum, and I hope Gene Autrey's on, too," the youngest one said.

"They are real crazy about Westerns," Sarah remarked. "See them two cowboy pictures on the mantelpiece. Well, they got them by savin' tops from Dixie cups. They are prouder of them pictures than the little ones are of them Easter baskets you see hanging against the wall over yore dresser."

The dresser, the large bed, the small bed, a sewing machine, an old trunk, my chair and a red flowered linoleum comprised the furnishings of the room.

I knew the door just behind me was ajar but I could not turn around and find out the answer to a question which was puzzling me: What sleeping arrangements were provided in the next room for the five oldest children? However, when Sarah was called out into the yard to settle a dispute among her children I did turn around and glance through the half-closed door into the other room. In there I saw a dilapidated single bed covered with old quilts. A table and a chair were the only other pieces of furniture. When Sarah came back I was talking to the two-year old baby. She noticed for the first time that the door behind me

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was not closed. Quietly she pulled it to. As she did so I felt her glance upon me. I did not look up to meet her eyes.

“Do you like to read?” I asked her presently.

“Yes I do, and the children get some awful good books from the school library. “Last night I read till late from one May Belle got the other day. It's named “The Secret Garden. Did you ever read it?”

“Yes,” I told her. “And I enjoyed it too.”

“It's a good book,” she said.

Then she asked me some question about the garden which I could not answer and I told her it had been some time since I read the book. For ten or fifteen minutes Sarah told me about the big old house, the lovely old gardens and the queer little boy in Frances Hodgson's Burnett's “The Secret Garden” but I did not see the boy, nor the house, nor the garden. I could think only of the rickety little bed in the other room.

When she had finished with the story I asked her about her neighbors. “In the one room across the hall they lives Mrs. Wilson and her little boy. Her husband got killed on the railroad track two years ago. Upstairs in two of them rooms is Mrs. Hilden and her man. He works but she don't. She's goin' to have a baby next month. In the other two they's Mr. and Mrs. Hodges and their baby. It's s cute baby and if you'd like to see it she won't mind atall.”

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Following up Sarah's suggestion I climbed the unbanistered stairs and there to my left I saw an open door. At the sound of my steps a young woman who had just taken her hands out of biscuit dough came to the doorway and asked me in. Her kitchen was clean and neat with its green breakfast room suite, the green kitchen cabinet, and the green oil stove.

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"I came to see your baby," I said to her.

"He's in the other room," she replied. "Let me wash my hands and we'll go in there."

The five months old baby was playing on a pallet in the middle of the floor. He was a pretty child with light blue eyes and a well-shaped head. His mother picked him up and seated herself on the trunk. I sat down in the small rocking chair which belonged to the four-piece bedroom suite.

"Lord, I hope I don't ever have as many children as Mrs. Wall's got." she said by way of conversation.

"She does have a crowd," I agreed.

"I believe I'd die if I had that many and no way of taking care of 'em."

Gladys Hodges told me as we sat there together that she had been one of eight children. When her father died her mother moved with her family from the farm to the cotton mill. Gladys had to quit school and go to 10 work after finishing the seventh grade. That had been a disappointment to her but those days were gone now and she was happy with her husband and baby. At the mention of her baby she reached out and touched his little head tenderly. Robert didn't make but nine dollars' she continued presently, but out of that they were able to buy groceries and meet the installments on the furniture. The bedroom suite cost them \$60, the breakfast room suite \$24, and the cabinet \$25. She hoped before another year they'd have it all paid for. If no more babies came for few years maybe they'd get ahead. Surely wages would go up again.

She seemed so happy there in the room with her baby and her bright new furniture. She was glad that company had come and found her room orderly and neat. There were many ornaments placed here and there of which she was obviously proud. She saw me looking at the blue spotted china dog with the daschund-built body and the bulldog head.

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“The baby is crazy about that, too,” she said, and I looked again at the baby.

In a little while I left this room and knocked on the door where Mary Hilden lived. There was no response to my knock and I made my way down the uncertain stairs. Out in the hall I met Sarah Wall again.

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“Do you think business'll pick up enough by fall for mills to run two shifts?” she asked me.

“I hope so,” was the only reply I knew how to make.

“If it don't, I caint see how we'll live,” she said slowly. “I've got to get work and mill work is all I can do even if there was other jobs to be had. She shifted her left bare foot to prop it against the right. “Have you heard any talk of raising wages?” she asked hopefully.

“Not in the last few weeks,” I was forced to reply.

“They's coal to buy in winter and warm clothes and shoes,” she said. I was glad that the hall was filling with shadows. A moment later I had said good-bye and was walking down the worn porch steps. Up the road a little piece I saw Sarah's oldest child returning home with the candy box under her arm.