

**LOOM AND SPINDLE**  
**OR**  
**Life Among the Early Mill Girls**

**WITH A SKETCH OF**  
***"THE LOWELL OFFERING" AND SOME OF ITS CONTRIBUTORS***

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## CHAPTER I. LOWELL SIXTY YEARS AGO.

"That wonderful city of spindles and looms,  
And thousands of factory folk."

THE life of a people or of a class is best illustrated by its domestic scenes, or by character sketches of the men and women who form a part of it. The historian is a species of mental photographer of the life and times he attempts to portray; he can no more give the whole history of events than the artist can, in detail, bring a whole city into his picture. And so, in this record of a life that is past, I can give but incomplete views of that long-ago faded landscape, views taken on the spot.

It is hardly possible to do this truthfully without bringing myself into the picture,—a solitary traveller revisiting the scenes of youth, and seeing with young eyes a city and a people living in almost Arcadian simplicity, at a time which, in view of the greatly changed conditions of factory labor, may well be called a lost Eden for that portion of our working-men and working-women.

Before 1836 the era of mechanical industry in New England had hardly begun, the industrial life of its people was yet in its infancy, and nearly every article in domestic use that is now made by the help of machinery was then "done by hand." It was, with few exceptions, a rural population, and the material for clothing was grown on the home-farm, and spun and woven by the women. Even in comparatively wealthy families, the sons were sent to college in suits of homespun, cut and made by the village seamstress, and every household was a self-producing and self-sustaining community. "Homespun was their only wear," homespun their lives.

There was neither railway, steamboat, telegraph, nor telephone, and direct communication was kept up by the lumbering stage-coach, or the slow-toiling canal, which tracked its sinuous way from town to city, and from State to State. The daily newspaper was almost unknown, and the "news of the day" was usually a week or so behind the times. Money was scarce, and most of the retail business was done by "barter"—so many eggs for a certain quantity of sugar, or so much butter or farm produce for tea, coffee, and other luxuries. The people had plenty to eat, for the land, though sterile, was well cultivated; but if the children wanted books, or a better education than the village school could give them, the farmer seldom had the means to gratify their wishes. These early New Englanders lived in pastoral simplicity. They were moral, religious, and perhaps content. They could say with truth,—

"We are the same things that our fathers have been,  
We see the same sights that our fathers have seen,  
We drink the same stream, we feel the same sun,  
And run the same course that our fathers have run."

Their lives had kept pace for so many years with the stage-coach and the canal that they thought, no doubt, if they thought about it at all, that they should crawl along in this way forever. But into this life there came an element that was to open a new era in the activities of the country.

This was the genius of mechanical industry, which would build the cotton-factory, set in motion the loom and the spinning-frame, call together an army of useful people, open wider fields of industry for men and (which was quite as important at that time) for women also. For hitherto woman had always been a money-*saving*, rather than a money-earning, member of the community, and her labor could command but small return. If she worked out as servant, or "help," her wages were from fifty cents to one dollar a week; if she went from house to house by the day to spin and weave, or as tailoress, she could get but seventy-five cents a week and her meals. As teacher her services were not in demand, and nearly all the arts, the professions, and even the trades and industries, were closed to her, there being, as late as 1840, only seven vocations, outside the home, into which the women of New England had entered. (Author's note: These were teaching, needlework, keeping boarders, factory labor, type-setting, folding and stitching in book binderies....)

The Middlesex Canal was one of the earliest factors in New England enterprise. It began its course at Charlestown Mill-pond, and ended it at Lowell. It was completed in 1804, at the cost of \$700,000, and was the first canal in the United States to transport both passengers and merchandise. Its charter was extinguished in 1859, in spite of all opposition, by a decision of the Supreme Court. And thus, in less than sixty years, this marvel of engineering skill, as it was then considered, which was projected to last for all time, was "switched off the track " by its successful rival, the Boston and Lowell Railroad, and, with the stage-coach and the turnpike road became a thing of the past.

The course of the old Middlesex Canal can still be traced, as a cow-path or a woodland lane, and in one place, which I have always kept in remembrance, very near the Somerville Station on the Western Division of the Boston and Maine Railroad, can still be seen a few decayed willows, nodding sleepily over its grass-grown channel and ridgy paths,—a reminder of those slow times when it took a long summer's clay to travel the twenty-eight miles from Boston to Lowell.

The Boston and Lowell Railroad, probably the first in the United States, went into operation in 1835. I saw the first train that went out of Lowell, and there was great excitement over the event. People were gathered along the street near the " *deopot*," discussing the great wonder; and we children stayed at home from school, or ran barefooted from our play, at the first "toot " of the whistle. As I stood on the sidewalk, I remember hearing those who stood near me disputing as to the probable result of this new attempt at locomotion. " The engine never *can* start all them cars!" "She can, too." "She can't." "I don't believe a word of it." "She'll break down and kill everybody," was the cry.

But the engine did start, and the train came back, and the Boston and Lowell Railroad continued an independent line of travel for about the same number of years as its early

rival; when, by the "irony of fate," its individuality was merged in that of a larger and more powerful organization,—the Boston and Maine Railroad, of which, in 1895, it became only a section or division. But let us not regret too much this accident of time, for who knows what will become of this enormous plant during the next fifty years, when our railways, perhaps, may be laid in the "unfeatured air."

The first factory for the manufacture of cotton cloth in the United States was erected in Beverly, Mass., in 1787, and in 1790 Samuel Slater established the cotton industry in Pawtucket, R.I.; but the first real effort to establish the enterprise was in Lowell, where a large wooden building was erected at the Wamesit Falls, on the Concord River, in 1813.

The history of Lowell, Mass., is not identical with that of other manufacturing places in New factory people, and among them were the first who showed any visible sign of mental cultivation; and, second, because it was here that the practice of what was called "The Lowell factory system" went into operation, a practice which included the then new idea, that corporations should have souls, and should exercise a paternal influence over the lives of their operatives. As Dr. John O. Green of Lowell, in a letter to Lucy Larcom, said: "The design of the control of the boarding-houses and their inmates was one of the characteristics of the Lowell factory system, early incorporated therein by Mr. Francis Cabot Lowell and his brother-in-law, Patrick T. Jackson, who are entitled to all the credit of the acknowledged superiority of our early operatives."

Cotton-mills had also been started in Waltham, Mass., where the first power-loom went into operation in 1814; but, for lack of waterpower, these could be carried on to a limited extent only. It was therefore resolved, by gentlemen interested, that the "plant" should be moved elsewhere, and water privileges were sought in Maine, New Hampshire, and in Massachusetts. Finally, Pawtucket Falls, on the Merrimack River, was selected, as a possible site where a large manufacturing town could be built up. Here land was bought, and the place, formerly a part of Chelmsford, set off in 1826, was named Lowell, after Francis Cabot Lowell, who, through his improvements, was practically the inventor of the power-loom, and the originator of the cotton-cloth manufacture as now carried on in America.

Kirk Boott, the agent of the first corporation, (as the mills, boarding-houses,—the whole plant was called), was a great potentate in the early history of Lowell, and exercised almost absolute power over the mill-people. Though not an Englishman, he had been educated in England, had imbibed the autocratic ideas of the mill-owners of the mother country, and many stories were told of his tyranny, or his "peculiarities," long after he ceased to be a resident.

Of his connection with the early history of Lowell, it is stated that, before the water-power: was discovered there, he went as agent of the, purchasers, to Gardiner, Me., and tried to buy of R. H. Gardiner, Esq., the great water privilege belonging to his estate. Mr. Gardiner would not sell, but was willing to lease it. Kirk Boott would not agree to this, or Lowell might now have been on the Kennebec in Maine. Then he came to Chelmsford, and saw the great Merrimack River and its possibilities, and set himself shrewdly to work

to buy land on its banks, including the water-power. He represented to the simple farmers that he was going to raise fruit and wool, and they, knowing nothing of "mill privileges," believed him, and sold the greatest water-power in New England for almost nothing. When they discovered his real design in buying the land, and the chance for making money that they had lost, they were angry enough. A song was made about it, and sung by everybody. It began thus:—

There came a young man from the old countree,  
The Merrimack River he happened to see,  
What a capital place for mills, quoth he,  
Ri-toot, ri-noot, ri-toot, ri-noot, riumpty, ri-tooten-a.

The next verse told how he swindled the farmers by inducing them to sell the water-power for nothing:—

And then these farmers so cute,  
They *gave* all their lands and timber to Boott,  
Ri toot, ri-noot, etc.

He was not popular, and the boys were so afraid of him that they would not go near him willingly, for many of them had known what it was to have his riding-whip come down on their backs. There is one still living who remembers how it felt. This old boy remembers that one Fourth of July Kirk Boott raised the English and American flags over his house, with the Stars and Stripes *under* the English colors; he would not change them at the suggestion of an indignant mob who had gathered, and they did it for him. Kirk Boott's house and garden were located on the spot where the Boott Corporation now stands. The house was a very fine mansion and stood near the river, and the garden was a wonder to everybody, fruit and flowers were brought to such perfection. So he did fulfil his promise after a sort to the former owners of the land, for he raised fruit on some of it, and the wool he raised, metaphorically, and pulled (as the song intimated) over the eyes of the deluded farmers.

The Merrimack Manufacturing Company was incorporated in 1822, a factory was built, and the first cotton cloth was made in 1823. It was coarse in texture,—the kind that might be used to "shoot pease through,"—though it was not sleazy, but thick and firm, something like thin sail-cloth, and it costs "two and threepence " (thirty-seven and one-half cents) a yard.

The first calico printing done in Lowell was on the Merrimack Corporation, and the prints were of very poor texture and color. The groundwork was madder, and there was a white spot in it for a figure; it cost about thirty cents a yard. This madder-color was the product of an extensive cowyard in the vicinity of the print-works, and the prints were "warranted not to fade."

I had a gown of this material, and it proved a garb of humiliation, for the white spots washed out, cloth and all, leaving me covered with eyelet-holes. This so amused my witty

brother that, whenever I wore it, he accused me of being more "holy than righteous." Dyers and calico printers were soon sent for from England, and a long low block on the Merrimack Corporation was built for their accommodation and called the "English Row." When they arrived from the old country they were not satisfied with the wages, which were not according to the agreement, and they would not go to work, but left the town with their families in a large wagon with a band of music. Terms were made with them, however, and they returned, and established in Lowell the art of calico printing.

The "Print Works" was a great mystery in its early days. It had its secrets, and it was said that no stranger was allowed to enter certain rooms, for fear that the art would be stolen. The first enduring color in print was an indigo blue. This was the groundwork, and a minute white spot sprinkled over it made the goods lively and pretty. It wore like "iron," and its success was the first step toward the high standard in the market once held by the "Merrimack Print."

Before 1840, the foreign element in the factory population was almost an unknown quantity. The first immigrants to come to Lowell were from England. The Irishman soon followed; but not for many years did the Frenchman, Italian, and German come to take possession of the cotton-mills. The English were of the artisan class, but the Irish came as "hewers of wood and drawers of water." The first Irishwomen to work in the Lowell mills were usually scrubbers and waste-pickers. They were always good-natured, and when excited used their own language; the little mill-children learned many of the words (which all seemed to be joined together like compound words), and these mites would often answer back, in true Hibernian fashion. These women, as a rule, wore peasant cloaks, red or blue, made with hoods and several capes, in summer (as they told the children), to "kape cool," and in winter to "kape warrum." They were not intemperate, nor "bitterly poor." They earned good wages, and they and their children, especially their children, very soon adapted themselves to their changed conditions of life, and became as "good as anybody."

To show the close connection in family descent of the artisan and the artist, at least in the line of color, it may be said here that a grandson of one of the first blue-dyers in this country is one of the finest American marine painters, and exhibited pictures at the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893.

In 1832 the factory population of Lowell was divided into four classes. The agents of the corporations were the aristocrats, not because of their wealth, but on account of the office they held, which was one of great responsibility, requiring, as it did, not only some knowledge of business, but also a certain tact in managing, or utilizing the great number of operatives so as to secure the best return for their labor. The agent was also something of an autocrat, and there was no appeal from his decision in matters affecting the industrial interests of those who were employed on his corporation.

The agents usually lived in large houses, not too near the boarding-houses, surrounded by beautiful gardens which seemed like Paradise to some of the home-sick girls, who, as they came from their work in the noisy mill, could look with longing eyes into the

sometimes open gate in the high fence, and be reminded afresh of their pleasant country homes. And a glimpse of one handsome woman, the wife of an agent, reading by an astral lamp in the early evening, has always been remembered by one young girl, who looked forward to the time when she, too, might have a parlor of her own, lighted by an astral lamp!

The second class were the overseers, a sort of gentry, ambitious mill-hands who had worked up from the lowest grade of factory labor; and they usually lived in the end-tenements of the blocks, the short connected rows of houses in which the operatives were boarded. However, on one corporation, at least, there was a block devoted exclusively to the overseers, and one of the wives, who had been a factory girl, put on so many airs that the wittiest of her former work-mates fastened the name of "Puckersville" to the whole block where the overseers lived. It was related of one of these quondam factory girls, that, with some friends, she once re-visited the room in which she used to work, and, to show her genteel friends her ignorance of her old surroundings, she turned to the overseer, who was with the party, and pointing to some wheels and pulleys over her head, she said. "What's them things up there?"

The third class were the operatives, and were all spoken of as "girls" or "men;" and the "girls," either as a whole, or in part, are the subject of this volume.

The fourth class, lords of the spade and the shovel, by whose constant labor the building of the great factories was made possible, and whose children soon became valuable operatives, lived at first on what was called the "Acre," a locality near the present site of the North Grammar schoolhouse. Here, clustered around a small stone Catholic Church, were hundreds of little shanties, in which they dwelt with their wives and numerous children. Among them were sometimes found disorder and riot, for they had brought with them from the *ould couthrey* their feuds and quarrels, and the "Bloody Fardowners " and the "Corkonians " were torn by intestinal strife. The boys of both these factions agreed in fighting the "damned Yankee boys," who represented to them both sides of the feud on occasion; and I have seen many a pitched battle fought, all the way from the Tremont Corporation (then an open field) to the North Grammar schoolhouse, before we girls could be allowed to pursue our way in peace.

We were obliged to go to school with our champions, the boys, for we did not dare to go alone. These "Acreites" respected one or two of us from our relationship to the "bullies," as some of the fighting leaders of our boys were called; and when caught alone by Acreites coming home from school, we have been in terror of our lives, till we heard some of them say, in a language used by all sides, air-o-there owes-o-gose e-o-the ooly-o-boos' ister-o-see. (There goes the bully's sister.) This language was called Hog Latin by the boys; but it is found in one of George Borrow's books, as a specimen of the Rommany or gypsy language. These fights were not confined to the boys on each side; after mill-hours the men joined in the fray, and evenings that should have been better employed were spent in carrying on this senseless warfare. The authorities interfered, and prevented these raids of the Acreites upon the school-children, and the warfare was kept

within their own domain. It lasted after this for more than ten years, and was ended by the "bloody battle " of Suffolk Bridge, in which a young boy was killed.

The agents were paid only fair salaries, the overseers generally two dollars a day, and the help all earned good wages. By this it will be seen that there were no very rich persons in Lowell, nor were there any "suffering poor," since every man, woman, and child, (over ten years of age) could get work, and was paid according to the work each was capable of doing.

The richest young lady of my time was the daughter of a deceased mill-owner; her income, it was said, was six hundred dollars a year! And many of the factory girls made from six to ten dollars a week! out of this, to be sure, they paid their board, which was one dollar and twenty-five cents a week. (Author's note: In addition to this, the corporation paid twenty-five cents a week to the boarding-house keeper, for each operative. But this sum was soon withdrawn, the girls were obliged to pay it themselves, and this was one of the grievances which caused the first strike among the Lowell factory operatives.)

By this it will be seen that there could not have been much aristocracy of wealth; but (as in most manufacturing cities to-day), there was a class feeling, which divided the people, though not their interests. For, as has been said, the corporation guarded well the interests of its employees; and as the mill-hands looked to the factories for their support, they worked as one man (and one woman) to help increase the growing prosperity of the city, which had given to them a new and permanent means of earning a livelihood.

The history of Lowell gives a good illustration of the influence of woman, as an independent class, upon the growth of a town or a community.

As early as 1836, ten years after its incorporation, Lowell began to show what the early mill girls and boys could do towards the material prosperity of a great city. It numbered over 17,000 inhabitants,—an increase of over 15,000 during that time.

In 1843 over one-half of the depositors in the Lowell Institution for Savings were millgirls, and over one-third of the whole sum deposited belonged to them,—in round numbers, \$101,992, and the new-made city showed unmistakable signs of becoming, what it was afterwards called, the "Manchester of America." But the money of the operatives alone could not have so increased the growth and social importance of a city or a locality. It was the result, as well, of the successful operation of the early factory system, managed by men who were wise enough to consider the physical, moral, and mental needs of those who were the source of their wealth.

Free co-educational schools were established in Lowell as early as 1830-1832, and a rule was made by the several corporations that every child under fourteen should attend them three months in the year.



Master Hills taught the North Grammar School, after it occupied its present site. I remember him in 1835; and I pause when I think of this teacher, and wonder if, in some other sphere, he remembers whipping a little girl to overcome her persistent denials of an accusation made against her, thereby forcing her to tell a lie. She was accused by one of her schoolmates of taking a one cent multiplication table from her desk, and tearing it in two. For this slight offence, he, a strong man, unheeding her denials of the charge, with a heavy strap, struck with his whole strength on the tender palm of the little hand of a child of scarcely ten years. He punished her till she could not see, for pain and terror, and then she gave in, whipped into a lie, and said she did it.

The punishment over she staggered to her seat, thinking that at last it was all over. But the end was not yet, for she had to learn by this early experience that one is but the beginning of a sum, and that she must tell many lies and keep on telling them, in order to maintain her position. Her little schoolmates said, "Why did you not say sooner that you did it, and save yourself all that whipping?" She could not tell them the truth, for they would not believe her. Her dear mother said, "If you wanted another multiplication table, why did you not ask me for one?" But she could not even confess the truth to her. Her good aunt accosted her with, "You sinner! do you not know what becomes of liars ? " She could not justify herself to avert that awful fate, and so she went on throwing out lie after lie (a heavy ballast), to save herself and to maintain her standing as a liar, till she was heartily sick of the whole matter, and wished that she had stuck to the truth, even if the master had killed her.

I have known Master Hills to go secretly behind a boy, who was playing at his desk, and strike him with a heavy strap across the back. Whipping was an every-day occurrence, and was done before all the children during school hours. A boy was made to lie across a chair, and was whipped in that position—not always through his clothing. Let us charitably hope that this cruel treatment of children was the fault of the times and of the arbitrary rule that was thought necessary to govern a community in those days. The day of children's rights had not yet dawned.

Master Jacob Graves followed Mr. Hills, and instilled into our minds what honor among children meant. He taught us to be truthful for truth's sake, his rule was mild and pleasant, he never punished with the rod, and his kind, remonstrating voice was more powerful than any whipping. In later life, many of his scholars sorrowed with him in his misfortunes, and now his memory lives in their hearts, a tender and pleasant recollection.

The first church edifice built in Lowell was St. Anne's. It was built under Kirk Boott's reign; and, without regard to the difference of the religious opinions of the operatives, the Episcopal form of service was adopted. Every operative on the Merrimack corporation was obliged to pay thirty-seven and a half cents a month toward the support of this church. This was considered unjust by the help, many of whom were "dissenters," and they complained so loudly at the extortion, which was not in the contract, that the tax was soon discontinued.

The Freewill Baptist Church was built largely of money belonging to over one hundred factory girls, who were induced by Elder Thurston's promises of large interest to draw their money from the savings-bank, and place it in his hands. These credulous operatives did not even receive the interest of their money, but, believing in him as an elder of the church, they were persuaded, even a second time, to let him have their savings. This building has had a curious and; eventful history," from grave to gay, from lively to severe." According to Mr. Cowley's history of Lowell, nothing had succeeded in it; and, to a believer in retributive justice, it would seem as if even the building deserved to be under a ban till those hard earnings were restored. The money wasted there represents so much of lost opportunity of education, lost means of comfort and maintenance, lost ability to keep or help the dear ones at home.

Early in the history of Lowell, Universalism became popular, and a large congregation, mostly young people, were soon gathered. This quite frightened those of certain other sects, and their ministers preached openly against the new doctrine; discussions and controversies were rife, and whether there was a hell or not, was the chief topic of the day among the factory people. That there was not was, of course, the more agreeable, and, with the fearless ones, the more popular side. There was a very benighted idea in the minds of many as to what this new religion really was, and "Infidel," and "Atheist," were the names applied by other denominations. Doctrinal feeling was strong, and young people who went with the "awful Universalists" received no favor from the other sects. The Unitarians also came under the ban, but the Universalists were the more condemned; and the good work they tried to do was hindered in more than one direction by this unchristian persecution...

## CHAPTER II. CHILD-LIFE IN THE LOWELL COTTON-MILLS.

In attempting to describe the life and times of the early mill-girls, it has seemed best for me to write my story in the first person; not so much because my own experience is of importance, as that it is, in some respects, typical of that of many others who lived and worked with me.

Our home was in Boston, in Leverett Court, now Cotting Street, where I was born the year the corner-stone was laid for the Bunker Hill Monument, as my mother told me always to remember. We lived there until I was nearly seven years of age, and, although so young, I can remember very vividly scenes and incidents which took place at that time. We lived under the shadow of the old jail (near where Wall Street now runs), and we children used to hear conversations not meant for small ears, between the prisoners and the persons in the court who came there to see them.

All the land on which the North Union Station now stands, with the railway lines connected with it, and also the site of many of the streets, particularly Lowell Street, was then a part of the Mill-pond, or was reclaimed from the Bay. The tide came in at the foot of Leverett Court, and we could look across the water and see the sailing vessels coming and going. There the down-east wood-coasters landed their freight; many a time I have gone "chipping" there, and once a generous young skipper offered me a stick of wood, which I did not dare to take.

In 1831, under the shadowy of a great sorrow, which had made her four children fatherless,— the oldest but seven years of age,—my mother was left to struggle alone; and, although she tried hard to earn bread enough to fill our hungry mouths, she could not do it, even with the help of hind friends. And so it happened that one of her more wealthy neighbors, who had looked with longing eyes on the one little daughter of the family, offered to adopt me. But my mother, who had had a hard experience in her youth in living amongst strangers, said, "No; while I have one meal of victuals a day, I will not part with my children." I always remembered this speech because of the word "victuals," and I wondered for a long time what this good old Bible word meant.

My father was a carpenter, and some of his fellow-workmen helped my mother to open a little shop, where she sold small stores, candy, kindling-wood, and so on, but there was no great income from this, and we soon became poorer than ever. Dear me! I can see the small shop now, with its jars of striped candy, its loaves of bread, the room at the back, where we all lived, and my oldest brother (now a "D.D.") sawing the kindling-wood which we sold to the neighbors.

That was a hard, cold winter; and for warmth's sake my mother and her four children all slept in one bed, two at the foot and three at the head,—but her richer neighbor could not get the little daughter; and, contrary to all the modern notions about hygiene, we were a

healthful and a robust brood. We all, except the baby, went to school every day, and Saturday afternoons I went to a charity school to learn to sew. My mother had never complained of her poverty in our hearing, and I had accepted the conditions of my life with a child's trust, knowing nothing of the relative difference between poverty and riches. And so I went to the sewing-school, like any other little girl who was taking lessons in sewing and not as a "charity child;" until a certain day when some tiling was said by one of the teachers, about me, as a "poor little girl,"—a thoughtless remark, no doubt, such as may be said to-day in "charity schools." When I went home I told my mother that the teacher said I was *poor*, and she replied in her sententious manner, "You need not go there again."

Shortly after this my mother's widowed sister, Mrs. Angeline Cudworth, who kept a factory boarding-house in Lowell, advised her to come to that city. She secured a house for her, and my mother, with her little brood and her few household belongings, started for the new factory town.

We went by the canal-boat, The Governor Sullivan, and a long and tiresome day it was to the weary mother and her four active children, though the children often varied the scene by walking on the tow-path under the Lombardy poplars, riding on the gates when the locks were swung open, or buying glasses of water at the stopping-places along the route.

When we reached Lowell, we were carried at once to my aunt's house, whose generous spirit had well provided for her hungry relations; and we children were led into her kitchen, where, on the longest and whitest of tables, lay, oh, so many loaves of bread!

After our feast of loaves we walked with our mother to the Tremont Corporation, where we were to live, and at the old No. 5 (which imprint is still legible over the door), in the first block of tenements then built, I began my life among factory people. My mother kept forty boarders, most of them men, mill-hands, and she did all her housework, with what help her children could give her between schools; for we all, even the baby three years old, were kept at school. My part in the housework was to wash the dishes, and I was obliged to stand on a cricket in order to reach the sink!

My mother's boarders were many of them young men, and usually farmers' sons. They were almost invariably of good character and behavior, and it was a continual pleasure for me and my brothers to associate with them. I was treated like a little sister, never hearing a word or seeing a look to remind me that I was not of the same sex as my brothers. I played checkers with them, sometimes "beating," and took part in their conversation, and it never came into my mind that they were not the same as so many "girls." A good object lesson for one who was in the future to maintain, by voice and pen, her belief in the equality of the sexes!

I had been to school constantly until I was about ten years of age, when my mother, feeling obliged to have help in her work besides what I could give, and also needing the money which I could earn, allowed me, at my urgent request (for I wanted to earn *money* like the other little girls), to go to work in the mill. I worked first in the spimling-room as

a "doffer." The doffers were the very youngest girls, whose work was to doff, or take off, the full bobbins, and replace them with the empty ones.

I can see myself now, racing down the alley, between the spinning-frames, carrying in front of me a bobbin-box bigger than I was. These mites had to be very swift in their movements, so as not to keep the spinning-frames stopped long, and they worked only about fifteen minutes in every hour. The rest of the time was their own, and when the overseer was kind they were allowed to read, knit, or even to go outside the mill-yard to play.

Some of us learned to embroider in crewels, and I still have a lamb worked on cloth, a relic of those early days, when I was first taught to improve my time in the good old New England fashion. When not doffing, we were often allowed to go home, for a time, and thus we were able to help our mothers in their housework. We were paid two dollars a week; and how proud I was when my turn came to stand up on the bobbin-box, and write my name in the paymaster's book, and how indignant I was when he asked me if I could "write." "Of course I can," said I, and he smiled as he looked down on me.

The working-hours of all the girls extended from five o'clock in the morning until seven in the evening, with one-half hour for breakfast and for dinner. Even the doffers were forced to be on duty nearly fourteen hours a day, and this was the greatest hardship in the lives of these children. For it was not until 1842 that the hours of labor for children under twelve years of age were limited to ten per day; but the "ten-hour law" itself was not passed until long after some of these little doffers were old enough to appear before the legislative committee on the subject, and plead, by their presence, for a reduction of the hours of labor.

I do not recall any particular hardship connected with this life, except getting up so early in the morning, and to this habit, I never was, and never shall be, reconciled, for it has taken nearly a lifetime for me to make up the sleep lost at that early age. But in every other respect it was a pleasant life. We were not hurried any more than was for our good, and no more work was required of us than we were able easily to do.

Most of us children lived at home, and we were well fed, drinking both tea and coffee, and eating substantial meals (besides luncheons) three times a day. We had very happy hours with the older girls, many of whom treated us like babies, or talked in a motherly way, and so had a good influence over us. And in the long winter evenings, when we could not run home between the doffings, we gathered in groups and told each other stories, and sung the old-time songs our mothers had sung, such as "Barbara Allen," "Lord Lovell," "Captain Kid," "Hull's Victory," and sometimes a hymn.

Among the ghost stories I remember some that would delight the hearts of the "Society for Psychological Research." The more imaginative ones told of what they had read in fairy books, or related tales of old castles and distressed maidens; and the scene of their adventures was sometimes laid among the foundation stones of the new mill, just building.

And we told each other of our little hopes and desires, and what we meant to do when we grew up. For we had our aspirations; and one of us, who danced the "shawl dance," as she called it, in the spinning-room alley, for the amusement of her admiring companions, discussed seriously with another little girl the scheme of their running away together, and joining the circus. Fortunately, there was a grain of good sense lurking in the mind of this gay little lassie, with the thought of the mother at home, and the scheme was not carried out.

There was another little girl, whose mother was suffering with consumption, and who went out of the mill almost every forenoon, to buy and cook oysters, which she brought in hot, for her mother's luncheon. The mother soon went to her rest, and the little daughter, after tasting the first bitter experience of life, followed her. Dear Lizzie Osborne! little sister of my child-soul, such friendship as ours is not often repeated in after life! Many pathetic stories might be told of these little fatherless mill-children, who worked near their mothers, and who went hand in hand with them to and from the mill. I cannot tell how it happened that some of us knew about the English factory children, who, it was said, were treated so badly, and were even whipped by their cruel overseers. But we did know of it, and used to sing, to a doleful little tune, some verses called, "The Factory Girl's Last Day." I do not remember it well enough to quote it as written, but have refreshed my memory by reading it lately in Robert Dale Owen's writings:--

#### **THE FACTORY GIRL'S LAST DAY.**

'Twas on a winter morning,  
The weather wet and wild,  
Two hours before the dawning  
The father roused his child,  
Her daily morsel bringing,  
The darksome room he paced,  
And cried, 'The bell is ringing—  
My hapless darling, haste!'

.....

The overlooker met her  
As to her frame she crept;  
And with his thong he beat her,  
And cursed her when she wept.  
It seemed as she grew weaker,  
The threads the oftener broke,  
The rapid wheels ran quicker,  
And heavier fell the stroke.

The song goes on to tell the sad story of her death while her "pitying comrades" were carrying her home to die, and ends:--

"That night a chariot passed her,  
While on the ground she lay;  
The daughters of her master,  
An evening visit pay.  
Their tender hearts were sighing,  
As negroes' wrongs were told,  
While the white slave was dying  
Who gained her father's gold."

In contrast with this sad picture, we thought of ourselves as well off, in our cosy corner of the mill, enjoying ourselves in our own way, with our good mothers and our warm suppers awaiting us when the going-out bell should ring.

Holidays came when repairs to the great mill-wheel were going on, or some late spring freshet caused the shutting down of the mill; these were well improved. With what freedom we enjoyed those happy times! My summer playhouse was the woodshed, which my mother always had well filled; how orderly and with what precision the logs were sawed and piled with the smooth ends outwards! The catacombs of Paris reminded me of my old playhouse. And here, in my castle of sawed wood, was my vacation retreat, where, with my only and beloved wooden doll, I lunched on slices of apple cut in shape so as to represent what I called "German halfmoon cakes." I piled up my bits of crockery with sticks of cinnamon to represent candy, and many other semblances of things, drawn from my mother's housekeeping stores.

The yard which led to the shed was always green, and here many half-holiday duties were performed. We children were expected to scour all the knives and forks used by the forty men-boarders, and my brothers often bought themselves off by giving me some trifle, and I was left alone to do the whole. And what a pile of knives and forks it was! But it was no task, for did I not have the open yard to work in, with the sky over me, and the green grass to stand on, as I scrubbed away at my "stent"? I don't know why I did not think such long tasks a burden, nor of my work in the mill as drudgery. Perhaps it was because I expected to do my part towards helping my mother to get our living, and had never heard her complain of the hardships of her life.

On other afternoons I went to walk with a playmate, who, like myself, was full of romantic dreams, along the banks of the Merrimack River, where the Indians had still their tents, or on Sundays, to see the "new converts" baptized. These baptizings in the river were very common, as the tanks in the churches were not considered *apostolic* by the early Baptists of Lowell.

Sometimes we rambled by the "race-way " or mill-race, which carried the water into the flume of the mill, along whose inclining sides grew wild roses, and the "rock-loving columbine;" and we used to listen to see if we could hear the blue-bells ring,—this was long before either of us had read a line of poetry.

The North Grammar school building stood at the base of a hilly ridge of rocks, down which we coasted in winter, and where in summer, after school-hours, we had a little cave, where we sometimes hid, and played that we were robbers; and together we rehearsed the dramatic scenes in "Alonzo and Melissa," "The Children of the Abbey," or the "Three Spaniards;" we were turned out of doors with Amanda, we exclaimed "Heavens!" with Melissa, and when night came on we fled from our play-house pursued by the dreadful apparition of old Don Padilla through the dark windings of those old rocks, towards our commonplace home. "Ah!" as some writer has said, "if one could only add the fine imagination of those early days to the knowledge and experience of later years, what books might not be written!"

Our home amusements were very original. We had no toys, except a few homemade articles or devices of our own. I had but a single doll, a wooden-jointed thing, with red cheeks and staring black eyes. Playing-cards were tabooed, but my elder brother (the incipient D.D.), who had somehow learned the game of high-low-jack, set about making a pack. The cards were cut out of thick yellow pasteboard, the spots and figures were made in ink, and, to disguise their real character, the names of the suits were changed. Instead of hearts, diamonds, spades, and clubs, they were called charity, love, benevolence, and faith. The pasteboard was so thick that all together the cards made a pile at least two or three feet high, and they had to be shuffled in sections! He taught my second brother and me the game of high-low-jack; and, with delightful secrecy, as often as we could steal away, we played in the attic, keeping the cards hidden, between whiles, in an old hair trunk. In playing the game we got along very well with the names of the face-cards,—the "queen of charity," the "king of love," and so on; but the "ten-spot of faith," and particularly the "two-spot of benevolence" (we had never heard of the "deuce") was too much for our sense of humor, and almost spoiled the "rigor of the game."

I was a "little doffer" until I became old enough to earn more money; then I tended a spinning-frame for a little while; and after that I learned, on the Merrinack corporation, to be a drawing-in girl, which was considered one of the most desirable employments, as about only a dozen girls were needed in each mill. We drew in, one by one, the threads of the warp, through the harness and the reed, and so made the beams ready for the weaver's loom. I still have the two hooks I used so long, companions of many a dreaming hour, and preserve them as the "badge of all my tribe" of drawing-in girls.

It may be well to add that, although so many changes have been made in mill-work, during the last fifty years, by the introduction of machinery, this part of it still continues to be done by hand, and the drawing-in girl—I saw her last winter, as in my time—still sits on her high stool, and with her little hook patiently draws in the thousands of threads, one by one.



### CHAPTER III. THE LITTLE MILL-GIRL'S ALMA MATER.

The education of a child is an all-around process, and he or she owes only a part of it to school or college training. The child to whom neither college nor school is open must find his whole education in his surroundings, and in the life he is forced to lead. As the cotton-factory was the means of the early schooling of so large a number of men and women, who, without the opportunity thus afforded, could not have been mentally so well developed, I love to call it their *Alma Mater*. For, without this incentive to labor, this chance to earn extra money and to use it in their own way, their influence on the times, and also, to a certain extent, on modern civilization, would certainly have been lost. I had been to school quite constantly until I was nearly eleven years of age, and then, after going into the mill, I went to some of the evening schools that had been established, and which were always well filled with those who desired to improve their scant education, or to supplement what they had learned in the village school or academy. Here might often be seen a little girl puzzling over her sums in Colburn's Arithmetic, and at her side another "girl" of fifty poring over her lesson in Pierpont's National Reader.

Some of these schools were devoted to special studies. I went to a geography school, where the lessons were repeated in unison in a monotonous sing-song tone, like this: "Lake Winnipeg! Lake Winnipeg! Lake Titicaca! Lake Titicaca! *Memphremagog!* *Memphremagog!*" and also to a school where those who fancied they had thoughts were taught by Newman's Rhetoric to express them in writing. In this school, the relative position of the subject and the predicate was not always well taught by the master; but never to mix a metaphor or to confuse a simile was a lesson he firmly fixed in the minds of his pupils.

As a result of this particular training, I may say here, that, while I do not often mix metaphors, I am to this day almost as ignorant of what is called "grammar" as Dean Swift, who, when he went up to answer for his degree, said he "could not tell a subject from a predicate;" or even James Whitcomb Riley, who said he "would not know a nominative if he should meet it on the street."

The best practical lesson in the proper use of at least one grammatical sentence was given to me by my elder brother (not two years older than I) one day, when I said, "I done it." "You done it!" said he, taking me by the shoulder and looking me severely in the face; "Don't you ever let me hear you say I done it again, unless you can use have or had before it." I also went to singing-school, and became a member of the church choir, and in this way learned many beautiful hymns that made a lasting impression on the serious part of my nature.

The discipline our work brought us was of great value. We were obliged to be in the mill at just such a minute, in every hour, in order to doff our full bobbins and replace them with empty ones. We went to our meals and returned at the same hour every day. We

worked and played at regular intervals, and thus our hands became deft, our fingers nimble, our feet swift, and we were taught daily habits of regularity and of industry; it was, in fact, a sort of manual training or industrial school.

Some of us were fond of reading, and we read all the books we could borrow. One of my mother's boarders, a farmer's daughter from "the State of Maine," had come to Lowell to work, for the express purpose of getting books, usually novels, to read, that she could not find in her native place. She read from two to four volumes a week; and we children used to get them from the circulating library, and return them, for her. In exchange for this, she allowed us to read her books, while she was at work in the mill; and what a scurrying there used to be home from school, to get the first chance at the new book!

It was as good as a fortune to us, and all for six and a quarter cents a week! In this way I read the novels of Richardson, Madame D'Arblay, Fielding, Smollett, Cooper, Scott, Captain Marryatt, and many another old book not included in Mr. Ruskin's list of "one hundred good books." Passing through the alembic of a child's pure mind, I am not now conscious that the reading of the doubtful ones did me any lasting harm. But I should add that I do not advise such indiscriminate reading among young people, and there is no need of it, since now there are so many good books, easy of access, which have not the faults of those I was obliged to read. Then, there was no choice. Today, the best of reading, for children and young people, can be found everywhere.

"Lalla Rookh" was the first poem I ever read, and it awoke in me, not only a love of poetry, but also a desire to try my own hand at verse-making.

And so the process of education went on, and I, with many another "little doffer," had more than one chance to nibble at the root of knowledge. I had been to school for three months in each year, until I was about thirteen years old, when my mother, who was now a little better able to do without my earnings, sent me to the Lowell High School regularly for two years, adding her constant injunction, "Improve your mind, try and be somebody." There I was taught a little of everything, including French and Latin; and I may say here that my "little learning," in French at least, proved "a dangerous thing," as I had reason to know some years later, when I tried to speak my book-French in Paris, for it might as well have been Choctaw, when used as a means of oral communication with the natives of that fascinating city.

The Lowell high school, in about 1840, was kept in a wooden building over a butcher's shop, but soon afterwards the new high school, still in use, was provided, and it was co-educational. How well I remember some of the boys and girls and I recall them with pleasure if not with affection. I could name them now, and have noted with pride their success in life. A few are so high above the rest that one would be surprised to know that they received the principal part of their school education in that little high school room over the butcher's shop.

I left the high school when fifteen years of age, my school education completed; though after that I took private lessons in German, drawing, and dancing! About this time my

elder brother and I made up our minds that our mother had worked hard long enough, and we prevailed on her to give up keeping boarders. This she did, and while she remained in Lowell we supported the home by our earnings. I was obliged to have my breakfast before daylight in the winter. My mother prepared it over night, and while I was cooking and eating it I read such books as Stevens's "Travels" in Yucatan and in Mexico, Tasso's "Jerusalem Delivered," and "Lights and Shadows of Scottish Life." My elder brother was the clerk in the counting-room of the Tremont Corporation, and the agent, Mr. Charles L. Tilden,—whom I think, where-ever he may be,—allowed him to carry home at night, or over Sunday, any book that might be left on his (the agent's) desk; by this means I read many a beloved volume of poetry, late into the night and on Sunday. Longfellow, in particular, I learned almost by heart, and so retentive is the young memory that I can repeat, even now, whole poems.

I read and studied also at my work; and as this was done by the job. or beam, if I chose to have a book in my lap, and glance at it at intervals, or even write a bit, nothing was lost to the "corporation."

Lucy Larcom, in her "New England Girlhood," speaks of the windows in the mill on whose sides were pasted newspaper clippings, which she calls "window gems." It was very common for the spinners and weavers to do this, as they were not allowed to read books openly in the mill; but they brought their favorite "pieces" of poetry, hymns, and extracts, and pasted them up over their looms or frames, so that they could glance at them, and commit them to memory. We little girls were fond of reading these clippings, and no doubt they were an incentive to our thoughts as well as to those of the older girls, who went to "The Improvement Circle," and wrote compositions.

A year or two after this I attempted poetry, and my verses began to appear in the newspapers, in one or two Annuals, and later in *The Lowell Offering*.

In 1846 I wrote some verses which were published in the Lowell Journal, and these caused me to make the acquaintance of the sub-editor of that paper, who afterwards became my life companion. I speak of this here because, in my early married life, I found the exact help that I needed for continued education,—the leisure to read good books, sent to my husband for review, in the quiet of my secluded home. For I had neither the gowns to wear nor the disposition to go into society, and as my companion was not willing to go without me, in the long evenings, when the children were in bed and I was busy making "auld claes look amaist as good as new," he read aloud to me countless books on abstruse political and general subjects, which I never should have thought of reading for myself.

These are the "books that have helped me." In fact, of all the books I have read, I remember but very few that have not helped me. Thus I had the companionship of a mind more mature, wiser, and less prone to unrealities than my own; and if it seems to the reader that my story is that of one of the more fortunate ones among the working-girls of my time, it is because of this needed help, which I received almost at the beginning of my womanhood. And for this, as well as for those early days of poverty and toil, I am devoutly and reverently thankful.

The religious experience of a young person oftentimes forms a large part of the early education or development; and mine is peculiar, since I am one of the very few persons, in this country at least, who have been excommunicated from a Protestant church. And I cannot speak of this event without showing the strong sectarian tendencies of the time.

As late as 1843-1845 Puritan orthodoxy still held sway over nearly the whole of New England; and the gloomy doctrines of Jonathan Edwards, now called his "philosophy," held a mighty grasp of the minds of the people, all other denominations being frowned upon. The Episcopal church was considered "little better than the Catholic," and the Universalists and the Unitarians were treated with even less tolerance by the "Evangelicals" than any sect outside these denominations is treated to-day. The charge against the Unitarians was that they did not believe *all* of the Bible, and that they preached "mere morality rather than religion."

My mother, who had sat under the preaching of the Rev. Paul Dean, in Boston, had early drifted away from her hereditary church and its beliefs; but she had always sent her children to the Congregational church and Sunday-school, not wishing, perhaps, to run the same risk for their souls that she was willing to take for her own, thus keeping us on the "safe side," as it was called, with regard to our eternal salvation. Consequently, we were well taught in the belief of a literal devil, in a lake of brimstone and fire, and in the "wrath of a just God."

The terrors of an imaginative child's mind, into which these monstrous doctrines were poured, can hardly be described, and their lasting effect need not be dwelt upon. It was natural that young people who had minds of their own should be attracted to the new doctrine of a Father's love, as well as to the ministers who preached it; and thus in a short time the mill girls and boys made a large part of the congregation of those "unbelieving" sects which had come to disturb the "ancient solitary reign" of primitive New England orthodoxy.

I used often to wish that I could go to the Episcopal Sunday-school, because their little girls were not afraid of the devil, were allowed to dance, and had so much nicer books in their Sunday-school library. "Little Henry and his Bearer," and "The Lady of the Manor," in which was the story of "The Beautiful Estelle," were lent to me; and the last-named was a delight and an inspiration. But the little "orthodox" girls were not allowed to read even religious novels; and one of my work-mates, whose name would surprise the reader, and who afterwards outgrew such prejudices, took me to task for buying a paper copy of Scott's "Red-gauntlet," saying, "Why, Hattie, do you not know that it is a novel?"

We had frequent discussions among ourselves on the different texts of the Bible, and debated such questions as, "Is it a sin to read novels?" "Is it right to read secular books on Sunday?" or, "Is it wicked to play cards or checkers?" By this it will be seen that we were made more familiar with the form, than with the spirit or the teaching, of Christianity.

In the spring of 1840 there was a great revival in Lowell, and some of the little girls held prayer-meetings, after school, at each other's houses, and many of them "experienced religion." I went sometimes to these meetings, and one night, when I was walking home by starlight, for the days were still short, one of the older girls said to me, "Are you happy?" "Do you love Jesus?" "Do you want to be saved?"—"Why, yes," I answered. "Then you have experienced religion," said the girl; "you are converted."

I was startled at the idea, but did not know how to deny it, and I went home in an exalted state of feeling; and, as I looked into the depths of the heavens above me, there came to my youthful mind the first glimmer of thought on spiritual themes.

It was an awakening, but not a conversion, for I had been converted from nothing to nothing. I was at once claimed as a "young convert," went to the church prayer-meeting, told my "experience" as directed, and was put on probation for admission to the church. Meanwhile, I had been advised not to ask my mother's consent to this step, because she was a Universalist, and might object. But I did not follow this advice; and when I told her of my desire, she simply answered, "If you think it will make you any happier, do so, but I do not believe you will be satisfied." I have allways been very thankful to my mother for giving me this freedom in my young life,--

"Not to be followed hourly, watched and noosed,"—  
this chance in such an important matter to learn to think and to act for myself. In fact, she always carried out this principle, and never to my recollection coerced her children on any important point, but taught them to "see for themselves."

When the day came for me to be admitted into the church, I, with many other little girls, was sprinkled; and, when I stood up to repeat the creed, I can truly say that I knew no more what were the doctrines to which I was expected to subscribe, than I did about the Copernican System or the Differential Calculus. And I might have said, with the disciples at Ephesus, I "have not so much as heard whether there be any Holy Ghost." For, although I had been regularly to church and to Sunday-school, I had never seen the Articles of Belief, nor had I been instructed concerning the doctrines, or the sacredness of the vow I was about to take upon me. Nor, from the frequent backsliding among the young converts, do I think my case was a singular one, although, so far as I know, I was the only one who *backslid* enough to be excommunicated.

And later, when I was requested to subscribe to the Articles of Belief, I found I could not accept them, particularly a certain part, which related to the day of judgment and what would follow thereafter. I have reviewed this document, and am able to quote the exact words which were a stumbling-block to me. "We believe . . . that at the day of judgment the state of all will be unalterably fixed, and that the punishment of the wicked and the happiness of the righteous will be endless."

When the service was over, I went home, feeling as if I had done something wrong. I thought of my mother, whom my church people called an "unbeliever;" of my dear little brother who had been drowned, and whose soul might be LOST, and I was most

unhappy. In fact, so serious was I for many days, that no doubt my church friends thought me a most promising young convert.

Indeed I was converted, but not in the way they supposed; for I had begun to think on religious subjects, and the more I thought the less I believed in the doctrines of the church to which I belonged. Doubts of the goodness of God filled my mind, and unbelief in the Father's love and compassion darkened my young life. What a conversion! The beginning of long years of doubt and of struggle in search of spiritual truths.

After a time I went no more to my church meetings, and began to attend those of the Universalists; but, though strongly urged, as a "come-outer," to join that body, I did not do so, being fearful of subscribing to a belief whose mysteries I could neither understand nor explain.

Hearing that I was attending the meetings of another denomination, my church appointed three persons, at least one of whom was a deacon, to labor with me. They came to our house one evening, and, while my mother and I sat at our sewing, they plied me with questions relating to my duty as a church member, and arguments concerning the articles of belief; these I did not know how to answer, but my mother, who had had some experience in "religious" disputes, gave text for text, and I remember that, although I trembled at her boldness, I thought she had the best of it.

Meanwhile, I sat silent, with downcast eyes, and when they threatened me with excommunication if I did not go to the church meetings, and "fulfil my covenant," I mustered up courage to say, with shaking voice, "I do not believe; I cannot go to your church, even if you do excommunicate me."

When my Universalist friends heard of this threat of excommunication, they urged the preparation of a letter to the church, giving my reasons for non-attendance; and this was published in a Lowell newspaper, July 30, 1842. In this letter, which my elder brother helped me to prepare,—in fact, I believe wrote the most of it,—several arguments against the Articles of Belief are given; and the letter closes with a request to "my brothers and sisters," to erase my name from "your church books rather than to follow your usual course, common in cases similar to my own, to excommunicate the heretic."

This request was not heeded, and shortly after a committee of three was "then appointed to take farther steps; " and this committee reported that they had "visited and admonished" me without success; and in November, 1842, the following vote was passed, and is recorded in the church book:—

"Nov. 21, 1842

*Whereas*, it appears that Miss Harriet Hanson has violated her covenant with this church,—first, by repeated and regular absence from the ordinances of the gospel, second, by embracing sentiments deemed by this church heretical; and *whereas*, measures have been taken to reclaim her, but ineffectual; therefore,

*Voted*, that we withdraw our fellowship from the said Miss Hanson until she shall give satisfactory evidence of repentance."

And thus, at seventeen years of age, I was excommunicated from the church of my ancestors, and for no fault, no sin, no crime, but simply because I could not subscribe conscientiously to doctrines which I did not comprehend. I relate this phase of my youthful experience here in detail, because it serves to show the methods which were then in use to cast out or dispose of those members who could not subscribe to the doctrines of the dominant church of New England.

For some time after this, I was quite in disgrace with some of my work-mates, and was called a "heretic" and a "child of perdition" by my church friends. But, as I did not agree, even in this, with their opinions, but went my "ain gait," it followed that, although I remained for a time something of a heretic, I was not an unbeliever in sacred things nor did I prove to be a "child of perdition." But this experience made me very unhappy, and gave me a distaste for religious reading and thinking, and for many years the Bible was a sealed book to me, until I came to see in the Book, not the letter of dogma, but rather the spirit of truth and of revelation. This experience also repressed the humorous side of my nature, which is every one's birthright, and made me for a time a sort of youthful cynic; and I allowed myself to feel a certain contempt for those of my work-mates who, though they could not give clear reason for their belief, still remained faithful to their "covenant."

There were two or three little incidents connected with this episode in my life that may be of interest. A little later, when I thought of applying for the position of teaching in a public school, I was advised by a well-meaning friend not to attempt it, "for," the friend added, "you will not succeed, for how can a Universalist pray in her school?"

Several years after my excommunication, when I had come to observe that religion and "mere morality" do not always go together, I had a final interview with one of the deacons who had labored with me. He was an overseer in the room where I worked, and I had noticed his familiar manner with some of the girls, who did not like it any better than I did; and one day, when his behavior was unusually offensive, I determined to speak to him about it.

I called him to my drawing-in frame, where I was sitting at work, and said to him something like this: "I have hard work to believe that *you* are one of those deacons who came to labor with a young girl about belonging to your church. I don't think you set the example of good works you then preached to me." He gave me a look, but did not answer; and shortly after, as I might have expected, I received an "honorable discharge" from his room.

But let me acknowledge one far-reaching benefit that resulted from my being admitted to the Orthodox church, a benefit which came to me in the summer of 1895. Because of my baptism, administered so long ago, I was enabled to officiate as god-mother to my grandchild and namesake, in Pueblo, Colorado,—one among the first of the little girls born on a political equality with the little boys of that enlightened State, born, as one may say,

with the ballot in her hand! And to any reader who has an interest in the final result of my religious experience, I may add, that, as late as 1898, I became a communicant of the Episcopal Church.

When the time came for me to become engaged to the man of my choice, having always believed in the old-fashioned idea that there should be no secrets between persons about to marry, I told him, among my other shortcomings, as the most serious of all, the story of my excommunication. To my great surprise, he laughed heartily, derided the whole affair, and wondered at the serious view I had always taken of it; and later he enjoyed saying to some of his gentlemen friends, as if it were a good joke, "Did you know my wife had been excommunicated from the church?"

And I too, long since have learned, that no creed—

"Can fix our doom,  
Nor stay the eternal Love from His intent,  
While Hope remaining bears her verdant bloom."



## CHAPTER IV. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE EARLY FACTORY GIRLS.

When I look back into the factory life of fifty or sixty years ago, I do not see what is called "a class" of young men and women going to and from their daily work, like so many ants that cannot be distinguished one from another; I see them as individuals, with personalities of their own. This one has about her the atmosphere of her early home. That one is impelled by a strong and noble purpose. The other, –what she is, has been an influence for good to me and to all womankind.

Yet they were a class of factory operatives, and were spoken of (as the same class is spoken of now) as a set of persons who earned their daily bread, whose condition was fixed, and who must continue to spin and to weave to the end of their natural existence. Nothing but this was expected of them, and they were not supposed to be capable of social or mental improvement.

That they could be educated and developed into something more than mere work-people, was an idea that had not yet entered the public mind. So little does one class of persons really know about the thoughts and aspirations of another! It was the good fortune of these early mill-girls to teach the people of that time that this sort of labor is not degrading; that the operative is not only "capable of virtue," but also capable of self-cultivation.

At the time the Lowell cotton-mills were started, the factory girl was the lowest among women. In England, and in France particularly, great injustice had been done to her real character; she was represented as subjected to influences that could not fail to destroy her purity and self-respect. In the eyes of her overseer she was but a brute, a slave, to be beaten, pinched, and pushed about. It was to overcome this prejudice that such high wages had been offered to women that they might be induced to become mill-girls, in spite of the opprobrium that still clung to this "degrading occupation." At first only a few came; for, though tempted by the high wages to be regularly paid in "cash," there were many who still preferred to go on working at some more *genteel* employment at seventy-five cents a week and their board.

But in a short time the prejudice against factory labor wore away, and the Lowell mills became filled with blooming and energetic New England women. They were naturally intelligent, had mother-wit, and fell easily into the ways of their new life. They soon began to associate with those who formed the community in which they had come to live, and were invited to their houses. They went to the same church, and sometimes married into some of the best families. Or if they returned to their secluded homes again, instead of being looked down upon as "factory girls" by the squire's or the lawyer's family, they were more often welcomed as coming from the metropolis, bringing new fashions, new books, and new ideas with them.

In 1831 Lowell was little more than a factory village. Several corporations were started, and the cotton-mills belonging to them were building. Help was in great demand; and stories were told all over the country of the new factory town, and the high wages that were offered to all classes of work-people,—stories that reached the ears of mechanics' and farmers' sons, and gave new life to lonely and dependent women in distant towns and farm houses. Into this Yankee El Dorado, these needy people began to pour by the various modes of travel known to those slow old days. The stage-coach and the canal-boat came every day, always filled with new recruits for this army of useful people. The mechanic and machinist came, each with his home-made chest of tools, and oftentimes his wife and little ones. The widow came with her little flock and her scanty housekeeping goods to open a boarding-house or variety store, and so provided a home for her fatherless children. Many farmers' daughters came to earn money to complete their wedding outfit, or buy the bride's share of housekeeping articles.

Women with past histories came, to hide their griefs and their identity, and to earn an honest living in the "sweat of their brow." Single young men came, full of hope and life, to get money for an education, or to lift the mortgage from the home-farm. Troops of young gills came by stages and baggage-wagons, men often being employed to go to other States and to Canada, to collect them at so much a head, and deliver them at the factories.

A very curious sight these country girls presented to young eyes accustomed to a more modern style of things. When the large covered baggage-wagon arrived in front of a block on the corporation, they would descend from it, dressed in various and outlandish fashions, and with their arms brimful of bandboxes containing all their worldly goods. On each of these was sewed a card, on which one could read the old-fashioned New England name of the owner. And sorrowful enough they looked, even to the fun-loving child who has lived to tell the story; for they had all left their pleasant country homes to try their fortunes in a great manufacturing town, and they were homesick even before they landed at the doors of their boarding-houses. Years after, this scene dwelt in my memory; and whenever anyone said anything about being homesick, there rose before me the picture of a young girl with a sorrowful face and a big tear in each eye, clambering down the steps at the rear of a great covered wagon, holding fast to a cloth-covered bandbox, drawn up at the top with a string, on which was sewed a paper bearing the name of Plumy Clay!

Some of these girls brought diminutive hair trunks covered with the skin of calves, spotted in dun and white, even as when they did skip and play in daisy-blooming meads. And when several of them were set together in front of one of the blocks, they looked like their living counterparts, reposing at noontide in the adjacent field. One of this kind of trunks has been handed down to me as an heirloom. The hair is worn off in patches; it cannot be invigorated, and it is now become a hairless heirloom. Within its hide-bound sides are safely stowed away the love-letters of a past generation,—love-letters that agitated the hearts of the grandparents of to-day; and I wonder that their resistless ardor has not long ago burst its wrinkled sides. It is relegated to distant attics, with its ancient crou, "ye bandbox," to enjoy an honored and well-earned repose.

Ah me! when some of us, its contemporaries, are also past our usefulness, gone clean out of fashion, may we also be as resigned, yea, as willing, to be laid quietly on some attic shelf !

These country girls had queer names, which added to the singularity of their appearance. Samantha, Triphena, Plumy, Kezia, Aseneth, Elgardy, Leafy, Ruhamah, Lovey, Almaretta, Sarepta, and Florilla were among them.

Their dialect was also very peculiar. On the broken English and Scotch of their-ancestors was ingrafted the nasal Yankee twang; so that many of them, when they had just come *daown*, spoke a language almost unintelligible. But the severe discipline and ridicule which met them was as good as a school education, and they were soon taught the "city way of speaking."

Their dress was also peculiar, and was of the plainest of homespun, cut in such an old-fashioned style that each young girl looked as if she had borrowed her grandmother's gown. Their only head-covering was a shawl, which was pinned under the chin; but after the first payday, a "shaker" (:or "scooter") sunbonnet usually replaced this primitive head-gear of their rural life.

But the early factory girls were not all country girls. There were others also, who had been taught that "work is no disgrace." There were some who came to Lowell solely on account of the social or literary advantages to be found there. They lived in secluded parts of New England, where books were scarce, and there was no cultivated society. They had comfortable homes, and did not perhaps need the money they would earn; but they longed to see this new "City of Spindles," of which they had heard so much from their neighbors and friends, who had gone there to work.

And the fame of the circulating libraries, that were soon opened, drew them and kept them there, when no other inducement would have been sufficient.

The laws relating to women were such, that a husband could claim his wife wherever he found her, and also the children she was trying to shield from his influence; and I have seen more than one poor woman skulk behind her loom or her frame when visitors were approaching the end of the aisle where she worked. Some of these were known under assumed names, to prevent their husbands from trusteeing their wages. It was a very common thing for a male person of a certain kind to do this, thus depriving his wife of *all* her wages, perhaps, month after month. The wages of minor children could be trusteeed, unless the children (being fourteen years of age) were given their time. Women's wages were also trusteeed for the debts of their husbands, and children's for the debts of their parents.

As an instance, my mother had some financial difficulties when I was fifteen years old, and to save herself and me from annoyance, she gave me my time. The document reads as follows:—

"Be it known that I, Harriet Hanson, of Lowell, in consideration that my minor daughter Harriet J. has taken upon herself the whole burden of her own support, and has undertaken and agreed to maintain herself henceforward without expense to me, do hereby release and quitclaim unto her all profits and wages which she may hereafter earn or acquire by her skill or labor in any occupation,—and do hereby disclaim all right to collect or interfere with the same. And I do give and release unto her the absolute control and disposal of her own time according to her own discretion, without interference from me. It being understood that I am not to be chargeable hereafter with any expense on her account.

(Signed) HARRIET HANSON.  
July 2, 1840."

It must be remembered that at this date woman had no property rights. A widow could be left without her share of her husband's (or the family) property, a legal "incumbrance " to his estate. A father could make his will without reference to his daughter's share of the inheritance. He usually left her a home on the farm as long as she remained single. A woman was not supposed to be capable of spending her own or of using other people's money. In Massachusetts, before 1840, a woman could not legally be treasurer of her own sewing-society, unless some man were responsible for her.

The law took no cognizance of woman as a money-spender. She was a ward, an appendage, a relict. Thus it happened, that if a woman did not choose to marry, or, when left a widow, to re-marry, she had no choice but to enter one of the few employments open to her, or to become a burden on the charity of some relative.

In almost every New England home could be found one or more of these women, sometimes welcome, more often unwelcome, and leading joyless, and in many instances unsatisfactory, lives. The cotton-factory was a great opening to these lonely and dependent women. From a condition approaching pauperism they were at once placed above want; they could earn money, and spend it as they pleased; and could gratify their tastes and desires without restraint, and without rendering an account to anybody. At last they had found a place in the universe; they were no longer obliged to finish out their faded lives mere burdens to male relatives. Even the *time* of these women was their own, on Sundays and in the evening after the day's work was done. For the first time in this country woman's labor had a money value. She had become not only an earner and a producer, but also a spender of money, a recognized factor in the political economy of her time. And thus a long upward step in our material civilization was taken; woman had begun to earn and hold her own money, and through its aid had learned to think and to act for herself.

Among the older women who sought this new employment were very many lonely and dependent ones, such as used to be mentioned in old wills as "incumbrances " and "relicts," and to whom a chance of earning money was indeed a new revelation. How well I remember some of these solitary ones! As a child of eleven years, I often made fun of

them—for children do not see the pathetic side of human life—and imitated their limp carriage and inelastic gait. I can see them now, even after sixty years, just as they looked,—depressed, modest, mincing, hardly daring to look one in the face, so shy and sylvan had been their lives. But after the first pay-day came, and they felt the jingle of silver in their pockets, and had begun to feel its mercurial influence, their bowed heads were lifted, their necks seemed braced with steel, they looked you in the face, sang blithely among their looms or frames, and walked with elastic step to and from their work. And when Sunday came, homespun was no longer their only wear; and how sedately gay in their new attire they walked to church, and how proudly they dropped their silver fourpences into the contribution-box! It seemed as if a great hope impelled them,—the harbinger of the new era that was about to dawn for them and for all women-kind.

In passing, let me not forget to pay a tribute, also, to those noble single and widowed women, who are "set solitary in families," but whose presence cements the domestic fabric, and whose influence is unseen and oftentimes unappreciated, until they are taken away and the integral part of the old home-life begins to crumble.

Except in rare instances, the rights of the early mill-girls were secure. They were subject to no extortion, if they did extra work they were always paid in full, and their own account of labor done by the piece was always accepted. They kept the figures, and were paid accordingly. This was notably the case with the weavers and drawing-in girls. Though the hours of labor were long, they were not over-worked; they were obliged to tend no more looms and frames than they could easily take care of, and they had plenty of time to sit and rest. I have known a girl to sit idle twenty or thirty minutes at a time. They were not driven, and their work-a-day life was made easy. They were treated with consideration by their employers, and there was a feeling of respectful equality between them. The most favored of the girls were sometimes invited to the houses of the dignitaries of the mills, showing that the line of social division was not rigidly maintained.

Their life in the factory was made pleasant to them. In those days there was no need of advocating the doctrine of the proper relation between employer and employed. *Help was too valuable to be ill-treated.* If these early agents, or overseers, had been disposed to exercise undue authority, or to establish unjust or arbitrary laws, the high character of the operatives, and the fact that women employees were scarce would have prevented it. A certain agent of one of the first corporations in Lowell (an old sea-captain) said to one of his boarding-house keepers, "I should like to rule my help as I used to rule my sailors, but so many of them are women I do not dare to do it."

The knowledge of the antecedents of these operatives was the safeguard of their liberties. The majority of them were as well born as their "overlookers," if not better; and they were also far better educated.

The agents and overseers were usually married men, with families of growing sons and daughters. They were members, and sometimes deacons, of the church, and teachers in

the same Sunday-school with the girls employed under them. They were generally of good morals and temperate habits, and often exercised a good influence over their help. The feeling that the agents and overseers were interested in their welfare caused the girls, in turn, to feel an interest in the work for which their employers were responsible. The conscientious among them took as much pride in spinning a smooth thread, drawing in a perfect web, or in making good cloth, as they would have done if the material had been for their own wearing. And thus was practised, long before it was preached, that principle of true political economy—the just relation, the mutual interest, that ought to exist between employers and employed.

Those of the mill-girls who had homes generally worked from eight to ten months in the year; the rest of the time was spent with parents or friends. A few taught school during the summer months.

When we left the mill, or changed our place of work from one corporation to another, we were given an "honorable discharge." Mine, of which I am still quite proud, is dated the year of my marriage, and is as follows:—

"HARRIET J. HANSON has been employed in the Boott Cotton Mills, in a dressing-room, twenty-five months, and is honorably discharged."  
(Signed) J. F. TROTT.  
Lowell, July 25, 1848."

The chief characteristics of the early mill-girls may be briefly mentioned, as showing the material of which this new community of working-women was composed. Concerning their personal appearance, I am able to quote from a magazine article written by the poet John G. Whittier, then a resident of Lowell. He thus describes,—

#### "THE FACTORY GIRLS OF LOWELL

"Acres of girlhood, beauty reckoned by the square rod,—or miles by long measure! the young, the graceful, the gay,—the flowers gathered from a thousand hillsides and green valleys of New England, fair unveiled Nuns of Industry, Sisters of Thrift, and are ye not also Sisters of Charity dispensing comfort and hope and happiness around many a hearthstone of your native hills, making sad faces cheerful, and hallowing age and poverty with the sunshine of your youth and love! Who shall sneer at your calling? Who shall count your vocation otherwise than noble and ennobling? "

Of their literary and studious habits, Professor A. P. Peabody, of Harvard University, gives his opinion in an article written not long ago in the *Atlantic Monthly*. He says, "During the palmy days of *The Lowell Offering* I used every winter to lecture for the Lowell Lyceum. Not amusement, but instruction, was then the lecturer's aim.... The Lowell Hall was always crowded, and four-fifths of the audience were factory-girls. When the lecturer entered, almost every girl had a book in her hand, and was intent upon it. When he rose, the book was laid aside, and paper and pencil taken instead; and there were very few who did not carry home full notes of what they had heard. I have never

seen anywhere so assiduous note-taking. No, not even in a college class, . . . as in that assembly of young women, laboring for their subsistence."

To introduce a more practical side of their character I will quote an extract from a letter received not long ago from a gentleman in the Detroit Public Library, which says, "The factory-girls went to Lowell from the hills of Vermont when I was a boy, numbers of them from every town in my county (Windsor); and it was considered something of a distinction to have worked for 'the corporation,' and brought home some hard cash, which in many and many cases went to help lift a mortgage on the farm, or to buy something needed for the comfort of the old folks, or to send a younger brother or sister to the Academy. I knew several of these girls who brought home purses from Lowell which looked big in those days, and I recall one who is still living in my native town of Pomfret."

It may be added here, that the majority of the mill-girls made just as good use of their money, so newly earned, and of whose value they had hitherto known so little. They were necessarily industrious. They were also frugal and saving. It was their custom on the first day of every month, after paying their board-bill (\$1.25 a week), to put their wages in the savings-bank. There the money stayed, on interest, until they withdrew it, to carry home or to use for a special purpose. It is easy to see how much good this sum would do in a rural community where money, as a means of exchange, had been scarce. Into the barren homes many of them had left it went like a quiet stream, carrying with it beauty and refreshment. The mortgage was lifted from the homestead; the farmhouse was painted; the barn rebuilt; modern improvements (including Mrs. Child's "Frugal Housewife"—the first American cook-book) were introduced into the mother's kitchen, and books and newspapers began to ornament the sitting-room table.

Some of the mill-girls helped maintain widowed mothers, or drunken, incompetent, or invalid fathers. Many of them educated the younger children of the family, and young men were sent to college with the money furnished by the untiring industry of their women relatives.

Indeed, the most prevailing incentive to our labor was to secure the means of education for some *male* member of the family. To make a *gentleman* of a brother or a son, to give him a college education, was the dominant thought in the minds of a great many of these provident mill-girls. I have known more than one to give every cent of her wages, month after month, to her brother, that he might get the education necessary to enter some profession. I have known a mother to work years in this way for her boy. I have known women to educate by their earnings young men who were not sons or relatives. There are men now living who were helped to an education by the wages of the early mill-girls. In speaking of this subject, Mr. Thomas Wentworth Higginson says,—

"I think it was the late President Walker who told me that in his judgment one-quarter of the men in Harvard College were being carried through by the special self-denial and sacrifices of women. I cannot answer for the ratio; but I can testify to having been an

instance of this myself, and to having known a never-ending series of such cases of self-devotion."

Lowell, in this respect, was indeed a remarkable town, and it might be said of it, as of Thrums in "Auld Licht Idyls," "There are scores and scores of houses in it that have sent their sons to college (by what a struggle), some to make their way to the front in their professions, and others, perhaps, despite their broadcloth, never to be a patch upon their parents."

The early mill-girls were religious by nature and by Puritan inheritance, true daughters of those men and women who, as some one has said, "were as devoted to education as they were to religion;" for they planted the church and the schoolhouse side by side. On entering the mill, each one was obliged to sign a "regulation paper" which required her to attend regularly some place of public worship. They were of many denominations. In one boarding-house that I knew, there were girls belonging to eight different religious sects. In 1843, there were in Lowell fourteen regularly organized religious societies. Ten of these constituted a "Sabbath School Union," which consisted of over five thousand scholars and teachers; three-fourths of the scholars, and a large proportion of the teachers, were mill-girls. Once a year, every Fourth of July, this "Sabbath School Union," each section, or division, under its own sectarian banner, marched in procession to the grove on Chapel Hill, where a picnic was held, with lemonade, and long speeches by the ministers of the different churches,— speeches which the little boys and girls did not seem to think were made to be listened to.

The mill-girls went regularly to meeting and "Sabbath-school;" and every Sunday the streets of Lowell were alive with neatly dressed young women' going or returning therefrom. Their fine appearance on "the Sabbath " was often spoken of by strangers visiting Lowell.

Dr. Scoresby, in his "American Factories and their Operatives," (with selections from *The Lowell Offering*.) holds up the Lowell mill-girls to their sister operatives of Bradford, England, as an example of neatness and good behavior. Indeed, it was a pretty sight to see so many wide-awake young girls in the bloom of life, clad in their holiday dresses,—

"Whose delicate feet to the Temple of God,  
Seemed to move as if wings had carried them here."

The morals of these girls were uniformly good. The regulation paper, before spoken of, required each one to be of good moral character; and if any one proved to be disreputable, she was very soon turned out of the mill. Their standard of behavior was high, and the majority kept aloof from those who were suspected of wrong-doing. They had, perhaps, less temptation than the working-girls of to-day, since they were not required to dress beyond their means, and comfortable homes were provided by their employers, where they could board cheaply. Their surroundings were pure, and the whole atmosphere of their boarding-houses was as refined as that of their own homes. They expected men to treat them with courtesy; they looked forward to becoming the wives of



good men. Their attitude was that of the German *Fraulein*, who said, "Treat every maiden with respect, for you do not know whose wife she will be."

But there were exceptions to the general rule, –just enough to prove the doctrine of averages; there were girls who came to the mill to work whom no one knew anything about, but they did not stay long, the life there being "too clean for them."

The health of the girls was good. The regularity and simplicity of their lives, and the plain and substantial food provided for them, kept them free from illness. From their Puritan ancestry they had inherited sound bodies and a fair share of endurance. Fevers and similar diseases were rare among them; they had no time to pet small ailments; the boarding-house mother was often both nurse and doctor, and so the physician's fee was saved. It may be said that, at that time, there was but one *pathy* and no "faith cures" nor any "science" to be supported by the many diseases "that flesh is heir to."

By reading the weekly newspapers the girls became interested in public events; they knew all about the Mexican war, and the anti-slavery cause had its adherents among them. Lectures on the doctrine of Fourier were read, or listened to, but none of them were "carried away" with the idea of spending their lives in large "phalansteries," as they seemed too much like cotton-factories to be models for their own future housekeeping.

The Brook Farm experiment was familiar to some of them; but the fault of this scheme was apparent to the practical ones who foresaw that a few would have to do all the manual labor and that an undue share would naturally fall to those who had already contracted the working-habit.

Mrs. Amelia Bloomer, one of the early pioneers of the dress-reform movement, found followers in Lowell; and parlor meetings were held at some of the boarding-houses to discuss the feasibility of this great revolution in the style of woman's dress. *The Lowell Journal* of 1850 states that on the Fourth of July a party of "Bloomerites" walked in the procession through the public streets, and *The London Punch* embellished its pages with a neat cartoon, a fashion-plate showing the different styles of the Bloomer costume. This first attempt at a reform in woman's dress was ridiculed out of existence by "public opinion;" but from it has been evolved the modern bicycle costume, now worn by women cyclers.

It seems to have been the fashion of the mill-girls to appear in procession on all public occasions. Mr. Cowley, in his "History of Lowell," speaks of President Jackson's visit to that city in 1833. He says: "On the day the President came, all the lady operatives turned out to meet him. They walked in procession, like troops of liveried angels clothed in white [with green-fringed parasols], with cannons booming, drums beating, banners flying, handkerchiefs waving, etc. The old hero was not more moved by the bullets that whistled round him in the battle of New Orleans than by the exhilarating spectacle here presented, and remarked, 'They are very pretty women, by the Eternal!'"

## CHAPTER V. CHARACTERISTICS.

One of the first strikes of cotton-factory operatives that ever took place in this country was that in Lowell, in October, 1836. When it was announced that the wages were to be cut down, great indignation was felt, and it was decided to strike, *en masse*. This was done. The mills were shut down, and the girls went in procession from their several corporations to the "grove" on Chapel Hill, and listened to "incendiary" speeches from early labor reformers.

One of the girls stood on a pump, and gave vent to the feelings of her companions in a neat speech, declaring that it was their duty to resist all attempts at cutting down the wages. This was the first time a woman had spoken in public in Lowell, and the event caused surprise and consternation among her audience.

Cutting down the wages was not their only grievance, nor the only cause of this strike. Hitherto the corporations had paid twenty-five cents a week towards the board of each operative, and now it was their purpose to have the girls pay the sum; and this, in addition to the cut in the wages, would make a difference of at least one dollar a week. It was estimated that as many as twelve or fifteen hundred girls turned out, and walked in procession through the streets. They had neither flags nor music, but sang songs, a favorite (but rather inappropriate) one being a parody on "I won't be a nun."

"Oh! isn't it a pity, such a pretty girl as I—  
Should be sent to the factory to pine away and die?  
Oh ! I cannot be a slave,  
I will not be a slave,  
For I'm so fond of liberty  
That I cannot be a slave."

My own recollection of this first strike (or "turn out" as it was called) is very vivid. I worked in a lower room, where I had heard the proposed strike fully, if not vehemently, discussed; I had been an ardent listener to what was said against this attempt at "oppression" on the part of the corporation, and naturally I took sides with the strikers. When the day came on which the girls were to turn out, those in the upper rooms started first, and so many of them left that our mill was at once shut down. Then, when the girls in my room stood irresolute, uncertain what to do, asking each other, "Would you?" or "Shall we turn out?" and not one of them having the courage to lead off, I, who began to think they would not go out, after all their talk, became impatient, and started on ahead, saying, with childish bravado, "I don't care what you do, I am going to turn out, whether any one else does or not;" and I marched out, and was followed by the others.

As I looked back at the long line that followed me, I was more proud than I have ever been since at any success I may have achieved, and more proud than I shall ever be again until my own beloved State gives to its women citizens the right of suffrage.

The agent of the corporation where I then worked took some small revenges on the supposed ringleaders; on the principle of sending the weaker to the wall, my mother was turned away from her boarding-house, that functionary saying, "Mrs. Hanson, you could not prevent the older girls from turning out, but your daughter is a child, and *her* you could control."

It is hardly necessary to say that so far as results were concerned this strike did no good. The dissatisfaction of the operatives subsided, or burned itself out, and though the authorities did not accede to their demands, the majority returned to their work, and the corporation went on cutting down the wages.

And after a time, as the wages became more and more reduced, the best portion of the girls left and went to their homes, or to the other employments that were fast opening to women, until there were very few of the old guard left; and thus the *status* of the factory population of New England gradually became what we know it to be to-day.

Some of us took part in a political campaign, for the first time, in 1840, when William H. Harrison, the first Whig President, was elected; we went to the political meetings, sat in the gallery, heard speeches against Van Buren and the Democratic party, and helped sing the great campaign song beginning:—

"Oh have you heard the news of late?"  
the refrain of which was:  
"Tippecanoe and Tyler too,  
Oh with them we'll beat little Van, Van,  
Van is a used-up man."

And we named our sunbonnets "log-cabins," and set our teacups (we drank from saucers then) in little glass tea-plates, with log-cabins impressed on the bottom. The part the Lowell mill-girls took in these and similar events serves to show how wide-awake and up to date many of these middle-century working-women were.

Among the *fads* of those days may be mentioned those of the "water-cure" and the "Grahamite." The former was a theory of doctoring by means of cold water, used as packs, daily baths, and immoderate drinks. Quite a number of us adopted this practice, and one at least has not even yet wholly abandoned it.

Several members of my mother's family adopted "Professor" Graham's regimen, and for a few months we ate no meat, nor, as he said, "anything that had life in it." It was claimed that this would regenerate the race; that by following a certain line of diet, a person would live longer, do better work, and be able to endure any hardship, in fact, that not

what we were, but what we ate, would be the making of us. Two young men, whom I knew, made their boasts that they had "walked from Boston to Lowell on an apple."

We ate fruit, vegetables, and unleavened or whole-wheat bread, baked in little round pats ("bullets," my mother called them), and without butter; there were no *relishes*. I soon got tired of the feeling of "goneness" this diet gave me; I found that although I might eat a pint of mashed potato, and the same quantity of squash, it was as if I had not dined, and I gave up the experiment. But my elder brother, who had carried to the extremest extreme this "potato gospel," as Carlyle called it, induced my mother to make his Thanksgiving squash-pie after a receipt of his own. The crust was made of Indian meal and water, and the filling was of squash, water, and sugar! And he ate it, and called it good. But I thought then, and still think, that his enjoyment of the eating was in the principle rather than in the pie.

A few of the girls were interested in phrenology; and we had our heads examined by Professor Fowler, who, if not the first, was the chief exponent of this theory in Lowell. He went about into all the schools, examining children's heads. Mine, he said, "lacked veneration;" and this I supposed was an awful thing, because my teacher looked so reproachfully at me when the professor said it.

A few were interested in Mesmerism; and those of us who had the power to make ourselves *en rapport* with others tried experiments on "subjects," and sometimes held meetings in the evening for that purpose.

The life in the boarding-houses was very agreeable. These houses belonged to the corporation, and were usually kept by widows (mothers of mill-girls), who were often the friends and advisers of their boarders.

Among these may be mentioned the mothers of Lucy Larcom; the Hon. Gustavus Vasa Fox, once Assistant Secretary of the Navy; John W. Hanson, D.D.; the Rev. W.H. Cudworth; Major General B.F. Butler; and several others.

Each house was a village or community of itself. There fifty or sixty young women from different parts of New England met and lived together. When not at their work, by natural selection they sat in groups in their chambers, or in a corner of the large dining-room, busy at some agreeable employment; or they wrote letters, read, studied, or sewed, for, as a rule, they were their own seamstresses and dressmakers.

It is refreshing to remember their simplicity of dress; they wore no ruffles and very few ornaments. It is true that some of them had gold watches and gold pencils, but they were worn only on grand occasions; as a rule, the early mill-girls were not of that class that is said to be "always suffering for a breast-pin." Though their dress was so simple and so plain, yet it was so tasteful that they were often accused of looking like ladies; the complaint was sometimes made that no one could tell the difference in *church* between the factory-girls and the daughters of some of the first families in the city.

Mrs. Sarah J. Hale, in *The Lady's Book*, in 1842, speaking of the impossibility of considering dress a mark of distinction, says: "Many of the factory-girls wear gold watches and an imitation at least of all the ornaments which grace the daughters of our most opulent citizens."

The boarding-houses were considered so attractive that strangers, by invitation, often came to look in upon them, and see for themselves how the mill-girls lived. Dickens, in his "American Notes," speaks with surprise of their home life. He says, "There is a piano in a great many of the boarding-houses, and nearly all the young ladies subscribe to circulating libraries." There was a feeling of *esprit de corps* among these households; any advantage secured to one of the number was usually shared by others belonging to her set or group. Books were exchanged, letters from home were read, and "pieces," intended for the Improvement Circle, were presented for friendly criticism.

There was always a best room in the boardinghouse, to entertain callers in, but if any of the girls had a regular gentleman caller, a special evening was set apart each week to receive him. This room was furnished with a carpet, sometimes with a piano, as Dickens says, and with the best furniture, including oftentimes the relics of household treasures left of the old-time gentility of the house-mother.

This mutual acquaintanceship was of great advantage. They discussed the books they read, debated religious and social questions, compared their thoughts and experiences, and advised and helped one another. And so their mental growth went on, and they soon became educated far beyond what their mothers or their grandmothers could have been. The girls also stood by one another in the mills; when one wanted to be absent half a day, two or three others would tend an extra loom or frame apiece, so that the absent one might not lose her pay. At this time the mule and spinning-jenny had not been introduced; two or three looms, or spinning-frames, were as much as one girl was required to tend, more than that being considered "double work."

The inmates of what may be called these literary households were omniverous readers of books, and were also subscribers to the few magazines and literary newspapers; and it was their habit, after reading their copies, to send them by mail or stage-coach to their widely scattered homes, where they were read all over a village or a neighborhood; and thus was current literature introduced into by and lonely places.

From an article in *The Lowell Offering*, ("Our Household," signed H. T.,) I am able to quote a sketch of one factory boarding-house interior. The author said, "In our house there are eleven boarders, and in all thirteen members of the family. I will class them according to their religious tenets as follows: Calvinist Baptist, Unitarian, Congregational, Catholic, Episcopalian, and Mormonite, one each; Universalist and Methodist, two each; Christian Baptist, three. Their reading is from the following sources: They receive regularly fifteen newspapers and periodicals; these are, the *Boston Daily Times*, the *Herald of Freedom*, the *Signs of the Times*, and the *Christian Herald*, two copies each; the *Christian Register*, *Vox Populi*, *Literary Souvenir*, *Boston Pilot*, *Young Catholic's Friend*, *Star of Bethlehem*, and *The Lotuell Offering*, three copies each.

A magazine, one copy. We also borrow regularly the *Non-Resistant*, the *Liberator*, the *Lady's Book*, the *Ladies' Pearl*, and the *Ladies' Companion*. We have also in the house what perhaps cannot be found anywhere else in the city of Lowell,—a Mormon Bible."

The "magazine" mentioned may have been *The Dial*, that exponent of New England Transcendentalism, of which *The Offering* was the humble contemporary. The writer adds to her article: "Notwithstanding the divers faiths embraced among us, we live in much harmony, and seldom is difference of opinion the cause of dissensions among us." Novels were not very popular with us, as we inclined more to historical writings and to poetry. But such books as "Charlotte Temple," "Eliza Wharton," "Maria Monk," "The Arabian Nights," "The Mysteries of Udolpho," "Abellino, the Bravo of Venice," or "The Castle of Otranto," were sometimes taken from the circulating library, read with delight, and secretly lent from one young girl to another.

Our religious reading was confined to the Bible, Baxter's "Saints' Rest," "The Pilgrim's Progress," "The Religious Courtship," "The Widow Directed," and Sunday-school books.

It was fortunate for us that we were obliged to read good books, such as histories, the English classics, and the very few American novels that were then in existence. Cheap editions of Scott were but just publishing; "Pickwick," in serial numbers, soon followed; Frederika Bremer was hardly translated; Lydia Maria Child was beginning to write; Harriet Beecher Stowe was busy in her nursery, and the great American novel was not written,—nor yet the small one, which was indeed a blessing!

There were many representative women among us who did not voice their thoughts in writing, and whose names are not on the list of the contributors to *The Offering*. This was but one phase of their development, as many of them have exerted a widespread influence in other directions. They graduated from the cotton-factory, carrying with them the results of their manual training; and they have done their little part towards performing the useful labor of life. Into whatever vocation they entered they made practical use of the habits of industry and perseverance learned during those early years, and they have exemplified them in their stirring and fruitful lives.

In order to show how far the influence of individual effort may extend, it will be well to mention the after-fate of some of them. One became an artist of note, another a poet of more than local fame, a third an inventor, and several were among the pioneers in Florida, in Kansas, and in other Western States. A limited number married those who were afterwards doctors of divinity, major-generals, and members of Congress; and these, in more than one instance, had been their work-mates in the factory.

And in later years, when, through the death of the bread-winner, the pecuniary support of those dependent on him fell to their lot, some of these factory-girls carried on business, entered the trades, or went to college and thereby were enabled to practise in some of the professions. They thus resumed their old-time habit of supporting the helpless ones, and educating the children of the family.

These women were all self-made in the truest sense; and it is well to mention their success in life, that others, who now earn their living at what is called "ungenteel" employments, may see that what one does is not of so much importance as what one is. I do not know why it should not be just as commendable for a woman who has risen to have been once a factory-girl, as it is for an ex-governor or a major-general to have been a "bobbin-boy." A woman ought to be as proud of being self-made as a man; not proud in a boasting way, but proud enough to assert the fact in her life and in her works.

All these of whom I speak are widely scattered. I hear of them in the far West, in the South, and in foreign countries, even so far away as the Himalaya Mountains. But wherever they may be, I know that they will join with me in saying that the discipline of their youth helped to make them what they are; and that the cotton-factory was to them the means of education, their preparatory school, in which they learned the alphabet of their life-work.

Such is the brief story of the life of every-day working-girls; such as it was then, so it might be to-day. Undoubtedly there might have been another side to this picture, but I give the side I knew best,—the bright side!