

"Letters from Susan," Harriet Farley, *Lowell Offering*, Volume IV

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[Consider These Questions](#)

Background

In these articles, Harriet Farley describes factory life in the form of fictitious letters from a new mill girl to a friend at home.

LETTER SECOND

Lowell, April ---, ----

Dear Mary: In my last I told you I would write again, and say more of my life here; and this I will now attempt to do.

I went into the mill to work a few days after I wrote to you. It looked very pleasant at first, the rooms were so light, spacious, and clean, the girls so pretty and neatly dressed, and the machinery so brightly polished or nicely painted. The plants in the windows, or on the overseer's bench or desk, gave a pleasant aspect to things. You will wish to know what work I am doing. I will tell you of the different kinds of work.

There is, first, the carding-room, where the cotton flies most, and the girls get the dirtiest. But this is easy, and the females are allowed time to go out at night before the bell rings--on Saturday night at least, if not on all other nights. Then there is the spinning-room, which is very neat and pretty. In this room are the spinners and doffers. The spinners watch the frames; keep them clean, and the threads mended if they break. The doffers take off the full bobbins, and put on the empty ones. They have nothing to do in the long intervals when the frames are in motion, and can go out to their boarding-houses, or do any thing else that they like. In some of the factories the spinners do their own doffing, and when this is the case they work no harder than the weavers. These last have the hardest time of all--or can have, if they choose to take charge of three or four looms, instead of the one pair which is the allotment. And they are the most constantly confined. The spinners and dressers have but the weavers to keep supplied, and then their work can stop. The dressers never work before breakfast, and they stay out a great deal in the afternoons. The drawers-in, or girls who draw the threads through the harnesses, also work in the dressing-room, and they all have very good wages--better than the weavers who have but the usual work. The dressing-rooms are very neat, and the frames move with a gentle undulating motion which is really graceful. But these rooms are kept very warm, and are disagreeably scented with the "sizing," or starch, which stiffens the "beams," or unwoven webs. There are many plants in these rooms, and it is

really a good green-house for them. The dressers are generally quite tall girls, and must have pretty tall minds too, as their work requires much care and attention.

I could have had work in the dressing-room, but chose to be a weaver; and I will tell you why. I disliked the closer air of the dressing-room, though I might have become accustomed to that. I could not learn to dress so quickly as I could to weave, nor have work of my own so soon, and should have had to stay with Mrs. C. two or three weeks before I could go in at all, and I did not like to be "lying upon my oars" so long. And, more than this, when I get well learned I can have extra work, and make double wages, which you know is quite an inducement with some.

Well, I went into the mill, and was put to learn with a very patient girl--a clever old maid. I should be willing to be one myself if I could be as good as she is. You cannot think how odd every thing seemed to me. I wanted to laugh at every thing, but did not know what to make sport of first. They set me to threading shuttles, and tying weaver's knots, and such things, and now I have improved so that I can take care of one loom. I could take care of two if I only had eyes in the back part of my head, but I have not got used to "looking two ways of a Sunday" yet.

At first the hours seemed very long, but I was so interested in learning that I endured it very well; and when I went out at night the sound of the mill was in my ears, as of crickets, frogs, and jewsharps, all mingled together in strange discord. After that it seemed as though cotton-wool was in my ears, but now I do not mind at all. You know that people learn to sleep with the thunder of Niagara in their ears, and a cotton mill is no worse, though you wonder that we do not have to hold our breath in such a noise.

It makes my feet ache and swell to stand so much, but I suppose I shall get accustomed to that too. The girls generally wear old shoes about their work, and you know nothing is easier; but they almost all say that when they have worked here a year or two they have to procure shoes a size or two larger than before they came. The right hand, which is the one used in stopping and starting the loom, becomes larger than the left; but in other respects the factory is not detrimental to a young girl's appearance. Here they look delicate, but not sickly; they laugh at those who are much exposed, and get pretty brown; but I, for one, had rather be brown than pure white. I never saw so many pretty looking girls as there are here. Though the number of men is small in proportion there are many marriages here, and a great deal of courting. I will tell you of this last sometime.

You wish to know minutely of our hours of labor. We go in at five o'clock; at seven we come out to breakfast; at half-past seven we return to our work, and stay until half-past twelve. At one, or quarter-past one four months in the year, we return to our work, and stay until seven at night. Then the evening is all our own, which is more than some laboring girls can say, who think nothing is more tedious than a factory life.

When I first came here, which was the last of February, the girls ate their breakfast before they went to their work. The first of March they came out at the present breakfast hour, and the twentieth of March they ceased to "light up" the rooms, and come out between six and seven o'clock.

You ask if the girls are contented here: I ask you, if you know of *any one* who is perfectly *contented*. Do you remember the old story of the philosopher, who offered a field to the person who was contented with his lot; and, when one claimed it, he asked him why, if he was so perfectly satisfied, he wanted his field. The girls here are not contented; and there is no disadvantage in their situation which they do not perceive as quickly, and lament as loudly, as the sternest opponents of the factory system do. They would scorn to say they were contented, if asked the question; for it would compromise their Yankee spirit--their pride, penetration, independence, and love of "freedom and equality" to say that they were contented with such a life as this. Yet, withal, they are cheerful. I never saw a happier set of beings. They appear blithe in the mill, and out of it. If you see one of them, with a very long face, you may be sure that it is because

she has heard bad news from home, or because her beau has vexed her. But, if it is a Lowell trouble, it is because she has failed in getting off as many "sets" or "pieces" as she intended to have done; or because she had a sad "break-out," or "break-down," in her work, or something of that sort.

You ask if the work is not disagreeable. Not when one is accustomed to it. It tried my patience sadly at first, and does now when it does not run well; but, in general, I like it very much. It is easy to do, and does not require very violent exertion, as much of our farm work does.

You also ask how I get along with the girls here. Very well indeed; only we came near having a little flurry once. You know I told you I lodged in the "long attic." Well, a little while ago, there was a place vacated in a pleasant lower chamber. Mrs. C. said that it was my "chum's" turn to go down stairs to lodge, unless she would waive her claim in favor of me. You must know that here they get up in the world by getting down, which is what the boys in our debating society used to call a paradox. Clara, that is the girl's name, was not at all disposed to give up her rights, but maintained them staunchly. I had nothing to do about it--the girls in the lower room liked me, and disliked Clara, and were determined that it should not be at all pleasant weather there if she did come. Mrs. C. was in a dilemma. Clara's turn came first. The other two girls in the chamber were sisters, and would not separate, so they were out of the question. I wanted to go, and knew Clara would not be happy with them. But I thought what was my duty to do. She was not happy now, and would not be if deprived of her privilege. She had looked black at me for several days, and slept with her face to the wall as many nights. I went up to her and said, "Clara, take your things down into the lower chamber, and tell the girls that *I will not come*. It is your turn now, and mine will come in good time.

Clara was mollified in an instant. "No," said she; "I will not go now. They do not wish me to come, and I had rather stay here." After this we had quite a contest--I trying to persuade Clara to go, and she trying to persuade me, and *I got beat*." So now I have a pleasanter room, and am quite a favorite with all the girls. They have given me some pretty plants, and they go out with me whenever I wish it, so that I feel quite happy.

You think we must live very nice here to have plum-cake, &c. The plum-cake, and crackers, and such things as the bakers bring upon the corporations, are not as nice as we have in the country, and I presume are much cheaper. I seldom eat any thing that is not cooked in the family. I should not like to tell you the stories they circulate here about the bakers, unless I *knew* that they were true. Their brown bread is the best thing that I have tasted of their baking.

You see that I have been quite *minute* in this letter, though I hardly liked your showing the former to old Deacon Gale, and 'Squire Smith, and those old men. It makes me feel afraid to write you all I should like to, when I think so many eyes are to pore over my humble sheet. But if their motives are good, and they can excuse all defects, why I will not forbid.

'Squire Smith wishes to know what sort of men our superintendents are. I know very well what he thinks of them, and what their reputation is up our way. I am not personally acquainted with any of them; but, from what I hear, I have a good opinion of them. I suppose they are not faultless, neither are those whom they superintend; but they are not the over-bearing tyrants which many suppose them to be. The abuse of them, which I hear, is so very low that I think it must be unjust and untrue; and I do frequently hear them spoken of as *men*--wholehearted full-souled men. Tell 'Squire Smith they are not what he would be in their places--that they treat their operatives better than he does his "hired girls," and associate with them on terms of as much equality. But I will tell you who are almost universally un-popular: the "runners," as they are called, or counting-room boys. I suppose they are little whipper-snappers who will grow better as they grow older.

My paper is filling up, and I must close by begging your pardon for speaking of the Methodists as having lost their simplicity of attire. It was true, nevertheless, for I have not seen one of the old "Simon Pure" Methodist bonnets

since I have been here. But they may be as consistent as other denominations. Had few of us follow in the steps of the primitive Christians.

Yours as ever, Susan

LETTER THIRD

Lowell, July --, ---

Dear Mary: You complain that I do not keep my promise of being a good correspondent, but if you could know how sultry it is here, and how fatigued I am by my work this warm weather, you would not blame me. It is now that I begin to dislike these hot brick pavements, and glaring buildings. I want to be at home--to go down to the brook over which the wild grapes have made a natural arbor, and to sit by the cool spring around which the fresh soft brakes cluster so lovingly. I think of the time when, with my little bare feet, I used to follow in aunt Nabby's footsteps through the fields of corn--stepping high and long till we came to the bleaching ground; and I remember--but I must stop, for I know you wish me to write of what I am now doing, as you already know of what I have done.

Well; I go to work every day--not earlier than I should at home, nor do I work later, but I mind the confinement more than I should in a more unpleasant season of the year. I have extra work now--I take care of three looms; and when I wrote you before I could not well take care of two. But help is very scarce now, and they let us do as much work as we please: and I am highly complimented upon my "powers of execution." Many of the girls go to their country homes in the summer. The majority of the operatives are country girls. These have always the preference, because, in the fluctuations to which manufactures are liable, there would be much less distress among a population who could resort to other homes, than if their entire interest was in the city. And in the summer these girls go to rest, and recruit themselves for another "yearly campaign"--not a bad idea in them either. I shall come home next summer; I have been here too short a time to make it worth while now. I wish they would have a *vacation* in "dog days"--stop the mills, and make all the girls rest; and let their "men-folks" do up their "ditching," or whatever else it is they now do Sundays.

But these mills are not such dreadful places as you imagine them to be. You think them dark damp holes; as close and black as--as the Black Hole at Calcutta. Now, dear M., it is no such thing. They are high spacious well-built edifices, with neat paths around them, and beautiful plots of greensward. These are kept fresh by the "force-pumps" belonging to every corporation. And some of the corporations have beautiful flower gardens connected with the factories. One of the overseers, with whom I am acquainted, gave me a beautiful bouquet the other morning, which was radiant with all the colors of the rainbow, and fragrant with the sweet perfume of many kinds of mints and roses. He has a succession of beautiful blossoms from spring till "cold weather." He told me that he could raise enough to bring him fifty dollars if he chose to sell them; and this from a little bit of sand not larger than our front yard, which you know is small for a country house. But it is so full--here a few dollars have brought on a fresh soil, and "patience has done its perfect work," What might not be accomplished in the country with a little industry and taste.

But I have said enough of the outside of our mills--now for the inside. The rooms are high, very light, kept nicely whitewashed, and extremely neat; with many plants in the window seats, and white cotton curtains to the windows. The machinery is very handsomely made and painted, and is placed in regular rows; thus, in a large mill, presenting a beautiful and uniform appearance. I have sometimes stood at one end of a row of green looms, when the girls were gone from between them, and seen the lathes moving back and forth, the harnesses up and down, the white cloth winding over the rollers, through the long perspective; and I have thought it beautiful.

Then the girls dress so neatly, and are so pretty. The mill girls are the prettiest in the city. You wonder how they can keep neat. Why not? There are no restrictions as to the number of pieces to be washed in the boarding-house. And, as there is plenty of water in the mill, the girls can wash their laces and muslins

and other nice things them-selves, and no boarding woman ever refuses the conveniences for starching and ironing. You say too that you do not see how we can have so many conveniences and comforts at the price we pay for board. You must remember that the boarding-houses belong to the companies, and are let to the tenants far below the usual city rent--sometimes the rent is remitted. Then there are large families, so that there are the profits of many individuals. The country farmers are quite in the habit of bringing their produce to the boarding-houses for sale, thus reducing the price by the omission of the market-man's profit. So you see there are many ways by which we get along so well.

You ask me how the girls behave in the mill, and what are the punishments. They behave very well while about their work, and I have never heard of punishments, or scoldings, or anything of that sort. Sometimes an overseer finds fault, and sometimes offends a girl by refusing to let her stay out of the mill, or some deprivation like that; and then, perhaps, there are tears and pouts on her part, but, in general, the tone of intercourse between the girls and overseers is very good--pleasant, yet respectful. When the latter are fatherly sort of men the girls frequently resort to them for advice and assistance about other affairs than their work. Very seldom is this confidence abused; but, among the thousands of overseers who have lived in Lowell, and the tens of thousands of girls who have in time been here, there are legends still told of wrong suffered and committed. "To err is human," and when the frailties of humanity are exhibited by a factory girl it is thought of for worse than are the errors of any other persons.

The only punishment among the girls is dismissal from their places. They do not, as many think, withhold their wages; and as for corporal punishment--mercy on me! To strike a female would cost any overseer his place. If the superintendents did not take the affair into consideration the girls would turn out, as they did at the Temperance celebration, "Independent day;" and if they didn't look as pretty, I am sure they would produce as deep an impression. By the way, I almost forgot to tell you that we had a "Fourth of July" in Lowell, and a nice one it was too. The Temperance celebration was the chief dish in the entertainment. The chief, did I say? It was almost the whole. It was the great turkey that Scroggs sent for Bob Cratchet's Christmas dinner. But, perhaps you don't read Dick-ens, so I will make no more "classical allusions." In the evening we had the Hutchinsons, from our own Granite State, who discoursed sweet music so sweetly. They have become great favorites with the public. It is not on account of their fine voices only, but their pleasant modest manners--the perfect sense of propriety which they exhibit in all their demeanor; and I think they are not less popular here because they sing the wrongs of the slave, and the praises of cold water.