

How a Boy Became a Mill-worker in Dundee, 1850

(This story of how a boy became a mill worker in Dundee was first published anonymously, reputedly by Frank Forrest, son of an Australian convict, in the *Northern Warder*. It was edited and published in book form by James Myles (1819-51), mason, bookseller, author, publisher and Chartist. [James Myles]. *Chapters in the Life of a Dundee Factory Boy*, Dundee, 1850, pp. 2-15; in J. T. Ward, ed., *The Factory System, Vol. II, Birth and Growth* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1970), pp. 48-56.)

To begin at the beginning, I may succinctly state that my father was a country shoemaker, and, like most of his class, somewhat speculative; fond of political and religious disputation, and not altogether devoid of a taste for 'the bottle'. In addition to carrying on a trade in the locality, which, by the way, was in the vicinity of Glamis, he likewise rented a small "pendicle" of about six acres ... Can the reader blame me then, when I affirm that I think the little cottage where I was born was the sweetest spot on earth. The tidy garden, the river, the thick plantations, over which towered the grey turrets of the ancient castle of Glamis, the soothing solace of an affectionate mother's love, and all the innocent amusements and prattling of you'th's warm existence, rush on my memory, and force me to conclude that I have seen no place like the place of my childhood. The dim remembrances that I yet have of these happy days impress me with the belief that my father and mother lived comfortably, and knew nothing of want and its grim attendants; but alas, evil days were in store for us, and the erring footsteps of a parent brought misery on himself, an innocent wife, and helpless family -so true is it that the sins of the father are visited upon the children. Let me briefly detail the catastrophe alluded to. . . .

One year my father attended [Glamis] market for the purpose of selling a young cow which he had fed for the butchers. After disposing of the animal, he entered a tent with a few friends, and indulged somewhat freely in -whisky potations. He was naturally quiet and obliging in his everyday demeanour, but when unhinged by the whisky demon, he was contradictory and quarrelsome in his disposition, so much so that my mother, who on usual occasions wielded a great influence over his mind, wept with very fear when she saw him coming home intoxicated. On the evening in question, he sat long and drank deeply, and while doing so a person belonging to the parish of Kettle, who at one time was guilty of a highly dishonourable action towards him, entered the tent. Both were the worse for drink. Old sores were harshly touched. High words passed, and from words they came to blows, and, alas, my father struck him a dreadful blow on the head with a heavy staff, which felled him to the ground in a state of utter insensibility, and after lingering nearly six hours in unconscious existence he breathed his last ... A few months of weariness and grief rolled by, and my father was brought up for trial at the High Court of Justiciary, Perth. He at once pled guilty to culpable homicide, and the public prosecutor accepted the plea. A numerous and respectable array of testimonials and witnesses to character were produced in court, but the judge dwelt severely on the fact that there was ill-will existing in my father's mind against the deceased at the time the unhappy event occurred; and as intoxication

could not, under any circumstances, be admitted as an extenuation for crime, considering his duty to society he could not, he said, sentence him to less punishment than seven years' transportation . . . When my mother received the intelligence of his sentence, she felt a sorrowful gratitude, as she fearfully anticipated a more terrible doom, and with a fervent faith that all was for good, she gradually resigned herself to her lot. After my father's conviction she was obliged to sell her cow, to defray some legal expenses incurred, and at the following term, the laird, in conjunction with a few unbending creditors, roused the whole of her little stock and household furniture, excepting a chest of drawers she had got as a dowry from her father and some other trifles. She was thus left almost destitute, and the crime of my father having raised an ignorant prejudice against her, she determined on leaving the place which had witnessed the disgrace of her husband and the social degradation of herself and two children. From the general wreck of her worldly fortunes she managed to save a few blankets and sheets, a bedstead, and the chest of drawers spoken of. Though a severe trial to her, she was obliged to sell the latter to a neighbour for £2. 10/-. She then packed up her little property and consigned it to the carrier who in those days traded between Dundee and Glamis, and with a heavy heart left the spot rendered sacred to her by many endearing associations, and retired to hide her poverty in the busy regions of a great manufacturing town. It was on a warm morning in May, when I had scarcely reached my seventh year, that we set out on foot. I asked my mother if we were going to see my father. She gave me no direct answer, but told me we were going where I would see many strange sights, and where I would require to work in a spinning mill, to help to keep her living. My young heart bounded with pleasure at the prospect of seeing Dundee, a town that I had heard the country people speak of as very large; and by their conversations I had concluded that there was no place equal to it....

Those who have spent all their days in the country feel awkward, and even lonely, when they first settle in a large Town . . . My new home was indeed a great change for a romping country boy, such as I then was. I had been accustomed to live in the fresh air of creation, to sport by the river that rolled past our secluded cot, to gaze on the green fields and rustling trees which beautified Strathmore, and to listen to the bleating of sheep, the lowing of cows, or the caroling of the skylark, warbling his matins at the portals of heaven; but now I was shut up in a narrow close where nothing could be seen but old dirty walls of stone and lime; and the music of the morning which fell on my ear was not the sweet songs of birds, but the harsh guttural roars of coal sellers and fish cadgers....

My mother now laid down what she conceived a workable programme for our future guidance. She purchased a pirn wheel, and secured the winding of pirns for two handloom weavers. She then applied at several spinning mills for work to me, but did not succeed. This dampened her hopes considerably, and, on the evening of her unsuccessful search, she sat down exhausted, and wept bitterly. To see a strong man "begging a brother of the earth to give him leave to toil", willing to work, unable to want, yet cannot get labour, is, says an eminent writer, "a melancholy sight", but methinks a mother forced to make her child a slave, depending for bread on the use of its bones and sinews, willing to sacrifice these, offering them in the market,

and unable to command a purchaser, is a more dismal picture still, and drives the contemplative mind to question the Christianity of civilization, where such pictures can be seen. Our support now depended on my mother's own energies, and, though she rose every morning by five o'clock, and toiled on until nine and ten at night, she could not earn above 6d. and 7d. per day, or on an average 3s. 3d. per week. Those accustomed to such labour will make a little more, but it being new to my mother, she could only gain this pittance by fifteen or sixteen hours close application. Every Monday morning she had to pay 11 d. for rent, which left her with about 2s. 4d. for our support. On this small sum, and a few shillings that remained of the money which she received for her drawers, we lived four weeks. On the beginning of the fifth week, I got work in a spinning mill at the Dens, which filled our hearts with joy, but so near starvation were we then, that my mother had only 4 1/2 d. in the world.

It was on a Tuesday morning in the month of "Lady June" that I first entered a spinning mill. The whole circumstances were strange to me. The dust, the din, the work, the hissing and roaring of one person to another, the obscene language uttered, even by the youngest, and the imperious commands harshly given by those "dressed in a little brief authority", struck my young country heart with awe and astonishment. At that time the twelve hours' factory act had not come into operation, and spinning mills were in their glory as huge instruments of demoralization and slavery. Mercenary manufacturers, to enable them to beat more upright employers in the markets, kept their machinery and hands active fifteen, and, in many cases, seventeen hours a-day, and, when tender children fell asleep under prolonged infliction of 'work! work! Work!', overseers roused them with the rod, or thongs of thick leather burned at the points. The lash of the slave driver was never more unsparingly used in Carolina on the unfortunate slaves than the canes and "whangs" of mill foremen were then used on helpless factory boys. When I went to a spinning mill I was about seven years of age. I had to get out of bed every morning at five o'clock, commence work at half-past five, drop at nine for breakfast, begin again at half-past nine, work until two, which was the dinner hour, start again at half-past two, and continue until half-past seven at night. Such were the nominal hours; but in reality there were no regular hours, masters and managers did with us as they liked. The clocks at the factories were often put forward in the morning and back at night, and instead of being instruments for the measurement of time, they were used as cloaks for cheaterly and oppression. Though this was known amongst the hands, all were afraid to speak, and a workman then was afraid to carry a watch, as it was no uncommon event to dismiss anyone who presumed to know too much about the science of horology. In country mills, a more horrid despotism reigned than in Dundee. There, masters frequently bound the young by a regular contract which gave them a more complete control over their labour and liberties than taking them from week to week. In one establishment in the vicinity of Dundee, the proprietor, a coarse-minded man, who by accident had vaulted out of his natural element into the position of a "vulgar rich" man, practised the contract system, and had bothies where he lodged all his male and female workers. They were allowed to cook, sleep, and live in any dog and cat manner they pleased, no moral superintendence whatever being exercised over them. His mill was kept going 17 and frequently 19 hours per day. To accomplish this all

meal hours were almost dispensed with, and women were employed to boil potatoes and carry them in baskets to the different flats; and the children had to swallow a potato hastily in the interval of putting tip "ends". On dinners cooked and eaten as I have described, they had to subsist till half-past nine, and frequently ten at night. When they returned to their bothies, brose, as it is a dish that can be quickly made, constituted their suppers, for they had no time to wait the preparation of a different meal. They then tumbled into bed: but balmy sleep had scarcely closed their urchin eyelids, and steeped their infant souls in blessed forgetfulness, when the thumping of the watchmen's staff on the door would rouse them from repose, and the words, "Get up; it's four o'clock", reminded them they were factory children, the unprotected victims of monotonous slavery. At this mill, and indeed all mills, boys and girls were often found sleeping in stairs and private places, and they have been seen walking about the flats in a deep sleep, with cans of "sliver" in their hands. When found in this state, they were caned or kicked according to the mood of their superiors.

One poor boy, who is still alive, and who, by force of mind, great persistency and rectitude, rose to be a mercantile clerk in Dundee, and now fills a responsible situation on one of the principal railways in England, was for some time in this factory. One day he was carrying an armful of bobbins from one flat to another. When ascending the stair, he sat down to rest, as his legs were sore and swollen by incessant standing. In a few moments he was fast asleep. Whilst enjoying this stolen repose, the master happened to pass. Without the least warning he gave him a violent slap on the side of the head, which stunned and stupified him. In a half-sleeping state of stupefaction he ran to the roving frame, which he sometimes attended, and five minutes had barely elapsed when his left hand got entangled with the machinery, and two of his fingers were crushed to a jelly, and had to be immediately amputated. His unfeeling taskmaster gave him no recompense-in fact never asked after him; he was left to starve or die, as Providence might direct.

The reader will no doubt imagine that boys working 18 and 19 hours a-day would have nearly double wages to boys at the present time, who only work ten. I can only speak from experience, and what has come under the range of my own knowledge on this point. When I went to the mill, I was paid with 1s. 6d. per week, and my nominal hours, as already remarked, were 13 hours per day. When the Twelve Hours' Act was in operation, boys had from 3s. up to 4s. per week; and now since the Ten Hours' Act came into force, their wages vary from 3s. 3d. to 4s. 3d. In short, as far as I can learn, their wages are as good under the Ten Hours' Act as they were under the Twelve Hours' Act. Of course the Act precludes such young boys as I was from working; yet, considering the hours I was confined and the wages I was paid with, the contrast is highly favourable to the humanity and wisdom of those good men who procured protection to factory children, and said to competition and capital, "Hitherto shalt thou come but no further".

My first day's experience as a factory boy damped my ardour, and, on returning home to my mother, I cried bitterly. In the flat in which I was employed there were seventeen girls from nine to twenty-five years of age, and I was the only boy. When the mill was set on, I experienced the most indescribable sensation. I looked strange and even stupid, and when I glanced to any of

my companions, as if supplicating sympathy; they returned my kindness by making wry faces and gestures, in ridicule of my country appearance. At the meal hours the other boys of the work gathered round me, as if I had been a natural curiosity imported from some distant clime. They "streaked my buttocks", swore, and challenged me to fight; and soon I found I would get no peace to live unless I risked the contingency of a battle. As there is honour among thieves, so I found a modicum of honour amongst mill boys, as one about my own age was selected to be my adversary. Accordingly we adjourned to a park near the Dens, and had a regular "mill", and in the crowd were animals called men prompting us on. It so happened that I proved the best pugilist, and ever afterwards I got more peace to attend my work, go and return from my meals, as I then was looked on as a member of the fraternity.

About a week after I became a mill boy, I was seized with a strong, heavy sickness, that few escape on first becoming factory workers. The cause of this sickness, which is known by the name of the "mill fever", is the pestiferous atmosphere produced by so many breathing in a confined place, together with the heat and exhalations of grease and oil. All these causes are aggravated in the winter time by the immense destruction of pure air by the gas that is needed to light the establishment. This fever does not often lay the patient up. It is slow, dull, and painfully wearisome in its operation. It produces a sallow and debilitated look, destroys rosy cheeks, and unless the constitution be very strong, leaves its pale impress for life. I have already mentioned the wages paid to boys under the Twelve and Ten Hours' Act, and the wages I received myself when there was no act. I may likewise refer to the wages of the female spinners. Those who were employed at the mill I first entered, received fully higher remuneration than what is now paid to the same class; but the reduction cannot by any show of facts or reason be ascribed to factory legislation. In 1824 the spinning trade was very brisk in this locality, and female spinners received 10s. per week, for which they attended 36 to 40 spindles during 15 or 16 hours every lawful day. At present a female spinner will attend from 100 to 120 spindles, according to the character of the material, and her wages range from 5s. 9d. to 6s. per week. Though she manages nearly double the quantity of spindles at present as compared with 1824, yet this does not result from extra labour being imposed on her, but from the extensive improvements in machinery since that date. It will thus be seen by the above comparison, which is as unfavourable a one as I could draw for the short-time system, inasmuch as it places in juxtaposition an extra brisk time with the present, which is only moderate, that the wages of female labour is fully 40 per cent less than in 1824; but the simple cause of this is keener competition in that department of the labour market, which has been greatly aggravated by the immense influx of Irish women during the last twenty years; and though no factory act had been conceived or carried into execution, similar effects would have flowed from the causes indicated.

If further evidence was needed to demonstrate the justice and correctness of this conclusion, it may be found in the fact, that the wages of spinners in 1832 before factory legislation extended to Dundee, and, when they worked thirteen hours a day, were 6s. and 6s. 6d. per week, being only a mere fraction more than what they now receive under the beneficent reign of the Ten Hours' Bill.