THE
CRY OF THE CHILDREN

A STUDY OF CHILD-LABOR

BY

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WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

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NEW YORK
MOFFAT, YARD AND COMPANY
1908

Van Vorst, Bessie (McGinnis). *The Cry of the Children: A Study of Child Labor*. New York: Moffat, Yard and Company, 1908. Print.

CHAPTER II

THE method of asking permission having met with such rebuff, as I took to be characteristic, I determined, on reaching Anniston, upon the more simple plan of walking into any factory that might be open and pursuing my inquiries regardless of consequences, until I was stopped or put out.

The town of Anniston lies among the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, half-way between Birmingham and Atlanta. Like all places whose destiny has been determined by alternate periods of boom and collapse, Anniston presents the appearance of an elaborate bit of confectionery pulled too hastily from an overheated oven. The fancifully trimmed buildings, in marble, stand unfinished, staring at the hovels beside them with the peculiar wide-eyed expression of a façade without window-frames. A tramway clangs along through the only street, and splashes

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off into mud at either end of the town. The prospectus sums up the history of Anniston in a word. It says: "In 1880, Anniston did not exist."

There was little need to ask directions for reaching the mills; over a slope of the hill on the village outskirts hung a black cloud, fed perpetually from a forest of chimneys that rose like the dark cypress trees of some *campo santo*. Thither I bent my steps.

The cotton-mill "folks" wear unwittingly a badge which distinguishes them far and wide. As I came along down over the hillside I met a child holding in her arms another smaller child: both were covered—their hair, their clothes, their very eyelashes—with fine flakes of lint, wisps of cotton, fibres of the great web in which the factories imprison their victims.

"Hello," I said, "do you work in the mill?"

"Yes, meaum." The voice was gentle and the manner friendly. And giving a sideways hitch to the baby, who had a tendency to slip

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from her tiny motherly arms, this little worker showed me one of her fingers done up in a loose, dirty bandage.

"I cut my finger right smart," she drawled, "so I'm takin' a day off."

"How old are you?"

"Tweayulve."

"Got any brothers or sisters?"

"I've got *him.*" She straightened the piece of lemon stick candy in the baby's mouth as she thus called attention to him, and continued, "And I've got one brother in the mill."

"How old is he?"

"Tweayulve."

"Twins?" I asked.

She smiled, and shook her head.

"He's tweayulve in the mill, and he's teayun outside."

This little bit of humanity, taking a day off as mother to a still tinier being, seemed a promising sponsor, and I suggested that we walk along together. She could not go to the mill with me, she explained, without first consulting her mother, so we proceeded to the

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settlement in which she lodged, along with the other eighty or a hundred families who man the mills in which she was a hand.

"That's where we live!"

Her fleet little bare feet picked a way deftly over the stony path, and she kept a hand free—when it was not laid on the baby's back—to point out the turns in the road that led to "where she lived." Her home was one of a group of frame one-story houses perched on a slant of ground. Each house was encircled by a wooden veranda, and the order of housekeeping described itself before the eyes, as a whisk of the broom which carried all the dirt from the kitchen on to the porch, and another whisk which landed it on the slant of ground, bedecked, in consequence, with old tin cans, decayed vegetables, pieces of dirty paper, rags, and chicken feathers.

It was to the more intimate quarter, however, that I penetrated with my guide. The inside court or square upon which these "homes" opened their back-doors, was a large mud-puddle overhung with the collective wash of the neighborhood. In and

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out of the mud-puddle wallowed the younger members of the mill families, receiving from time to time admonishing reprimands from a gently irate parent who swished her long cotton wrapper over the court, drawling to her offspring: "I sure will whip you if you-all don't quit."

"That-a-way's where we live," said my little companion, stepping on to the porch and depositing her load, as she opened the door and ran to announce a visit to her mother. The woman turned listlessly from the sewing-machine over which she was bent.

"Won't you come in?" she called to me, dragging out a chair by the fire, without getting up. "Lookin' for work?" she asked.

I took a seat, glancing at the interior which my little friend called "home." The outer room was a kitchen—though it might, except for the stove, have been mistaken for a hen-coop. The chickens pecked their way about the dirty floor, venturing as far even as the table upon which stood the meagre remains of a noonday meal. The second and the inner room had each a bed;—an unmade bed I was

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going to say, but how, indeed, could a bed be made without either sheets or pillows? Two grimy counterpanes were flung in disorder across the mattresses; a few chairs, a bureau, and the sewing-machine completed the house-furnishings.

As the listless woman talked with me in a kindly manner about work, the baby, who had crawled in from the porch, and arrived as far as his mother's skirts, now tugged at these, to be taken up. His tiny hands had served as propellers across the filthy floor; the piece of lemon candy had added to the general stickiness of the dirt with which both face and clothes were smeared. As a soldier shoulders his gun—the burden to which he is most accustomed,—this mother swung her baby into her arms, and, while she talked on, giving items about the cost of living and factory wages, she loosened her cotton jacket—evidently the only garment she had on—and folding the baby to her breast, she lulled its whimpering.

"Yes," she said, "we pay $1.50 a week for three rooms. That's a little over six a month.

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I call it high. We don't get no runnin' water. Every drop we uses 's got to be drawed in the yard; 'n we don't get no light either, nothin' but lamps."

The baby, comforted and consoled, let his hand stray over the woman's throat with little spasmodic caresses which left in their trail smears of dirt, flecked with tiny scarlet streaks where the sharp nails had caught in the pale, withered flesh.

"I reckon you-all might be cold," she said, directing the older girl to put more wood on the open-grate fire, thinking apparently nothing of herself. "We don't like it here first-rate. Mebbe we'll move on. I sure do crave travelling. Well, honey," this was addressed to the baby, who had sat up with a jerk and begun to whine. The candy, picked up from the floor where it had fallen and restored to its owner's mouth, did not seem the desired thing. The mother looked at me with a knowing smile.

"I reckon I can guess what ails him. He wants his babies." And at this, always without getting out of her chair before the ma-

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chine, she reached behind her and drew from a shelf over her head two white rats. These were apparently what the baby had wanted. In the game that ensued between him and his pets, his chief delight seemed to be in seeing the rats disappear through the open-throated gown of his mother, and make the tour of her bodice, wriggling, burrowing, crawling, to emerge finally from her collar at the nape of her neck. Sometimes they diversified their gyrations, proceeding upward into her hair and down again by way of her ears on to easier climbing ground. Impassable, unmoved, she talked on in her gentle, drawling voice, giving no sign whatever that she noticed the animals. It was only when the baby plunged his short nails into the white rat's side that she ejaculated mercifully:

"Quit that! You-all 'll hurt them babies."

I was somewhat dazed as I proceeded presently with my little guide from this interior to the mill. The squalor and disorder of what I had seen, the ignorance and the insen-

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revealed to me of which, knowing nothing, I had read only such accounts as I believed to be "sensational."

The operation of spinning is an extremely simple one. An expert hand can run as many as a thousand bobbins or ten "sides." A child of ten keeps from two to four "sides" going with no further effort than the renewing of the large bobbins, the cleaning of the "saliva" from the frames, and the refilling of the spindles whose threads have snapped. The replenishing of the quills is done by the smallest hands, who, from the task they perform in lifting the full spools off the frames to put empty ones in their places, are called "doffers."

The first child to whom I spoke stood waiting, without work, for the machinery to start up. He had on a cloth-cap, overalls, and a blue cotton shirt open at the throat. His face was wan, his eyes blue, with an intenser blue streak beneath them. His mouth was full of tobacco, which had caught in a dingy crust about his lips. As he leaned back, one foot

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crossed over the other, expectant for the spindles to begin again their whirling, he presented, in his attitude and gestures, the appearance not of a child, but of a gaunt man shrunk to diminutive size. Coming over to where he stood, I started conversation with him about his work.

"How many sides do you run a day?" I asked.

"Three to four," he answered.

"How much do you make?"

"About $2.40 a week."

Then hastily I put the question: "How old are you?"

"Goin' on tweayulve," he responded. "I've been workin' abeaout four years. I come in here when I was seayvun."

"Ever been to school?"

He shook his head. "No, meayum. I don't know if I'd like it. I reckon I'd as soon work here as be in school."

"How many hours do you work here a day?"

"From six until six."

The noise of the machinery was distract-

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ing, and as I bent over him to catch his answers, piped in a shrill, nasal voice, I could not but notice how fine and delicate his features were: the deep eyes, the high-arched nose, the slender lips were placed in the oval face as features only can be placed by the unerring mould that breeding casts. Observing also the miniature shoulders that seemed to have been oppressed by some iron hand, I said:

"Don't you get very tired?"

There was a pause which made more marked the honesty of his response:

"Why, I don't never pay much attention whether I get tired or not."

"You have an hour at noon?"

Here he pushed the cloth cap on to the back of his head, and sent a long, wet, black line from his mouth to the floor.

"Well," he said (it was the man who spoke, his arms akimbo, his body warped in the long tussle for existence), "they aim to give us an hour, but we don't never get more'n twenty-five minutes. We all live right up there." He nodded toward the square of

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houses clustered around the mud-puddle on the brink of the slovenly hillside. Then the bobbins began to revolve slowly, and the boy started back to his work.

"You can't loaf much," he explained, "when the machine's a-runnin'."

Up and down he plied on his monotonous beat—lone little figure. Ah, how far some of us could go if we worked thus in tacit submission, without stopping even to question whether or not we were tired!

Evidently waiting to join in the conversation, a small boy, I noticed, was standing beside me. His dark eyes sparkled merrily in his colorless face; he was dirty and covered with lint.

"What's your job?"

"Sweepin'," he grinned.

"How much do you make a day?"

"Twenty cents."

"And how old are you?"

"Seayvun."

The boy at the machine, making bands for the spindles, was "goin' on tayun." He earned twenty cents a day. Others I ques-

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