The Story of My Cotton Dress


(printed with original punctuation)
I HAVE HAD another accident!
A big tear in my pretty new dress.
This time I want to mend it.

Mary Cassatt, Girl Sewing, 1890 - 1892
When we went to Atlanta Georgia, a few weeks ago, and saw the beautiful white cotton fields, mother told me how little boys and girls must help make most of the stuff used for our dresses.
I used to think all other children had good times, and that going to school was very hard. Now I know better.
I appreciate my dresses more since I know that from the very beginning when the cotton is ripe in the hot sun, little boys and girls must pick it for my dresses, while their backs grow tired and their heads ache.
Mother also took me to a cotton mill, on that trip.
I saw how the cotton bolls are brought to the mill
and the fluffy soft white mass is combed


Lewis Hine photo of Boy sweater, wearing knickers, standing alongside carding machine in Lincoln Cotton Mills, Evansville, Indiana. Lewis Hine, photographer. LOC, 1908 Oct..
and then spun from one bobbin to another,

Lewis Hine photos. Full and empty bobbins, Doffers in Cherryville, NC, 1908
until it is the finest thread like the ravelings from the tear in my new dress.

Lewis Hine, Doffer in American Linen Co., Fall River, Mass. June 1916
The bobbins whirl around on large frames in the spinning room.
Little girl "spinners" walk up and down the long aisles, between the frames, watching the bobbins closely. When a thread breaks, the spinner must quickly tie the two ends together. Some people think that only children can do this quickly enough, but that is not so, for in a great many mills only grown-ups work.
Mary is one of the spinners. She was very sad. Standing all day long, she said, had broken down the arch of her foot and made her flatfooted, which is very painful.

Some people say it is good for the girls and boys to work—that all children should be industrious. But they do not stop to think that there is a right and a wrong kind of work for little girls and boys.
Spinning for a little while a day could be made the right kind,
but work in a spinning room from 7 o'clock in the morning until 6 o'clock at night is the wrong kind.
It keeps the children out of school, it gives them no chance to play, and they cannot grow strong.
Many spinning rooms have their windows closed all day because the rooms must be kept damp or the threads will break. Now, like growing plants, growing girls and boys need fresh air as well as light and sunshine.
But there are more than a million children in this country who do not have fresh air, or play, or school because they are working. And of these there are enough in the cotton mills to make a big city full.

When a bobbin is filled, the "doffer boy" comes along, takes it off the spinning frame and puts an empty bobbin in its place.
Many doffer boys and girl spinners grow up without learning to read or write, and without even hearing of George Washington.
Sometimes the machine is so high and the boys are so little, they have to climb up to reach the bobbins. If they slip they can hurt themselves badly.
At last the thread is ready to be woven into cloth. It is put through a machine called the warper, which prepares the threads which run the length of the goods. I think the hardest work the girls in the mill did was to thread every one of these warp threads through a tiny hole to prepare them for the loom that weaves the cloth.
"Surely, mother," I said when we left the cotton mill, "little girls can't do any more work for a dress."

Auguste Reading to Her Daughter, Mary Cassatt, 1910
"Ah, yes, dear," she said, "it is in the making of the dress itself that little girls take a big part. The cloth you saw woven is sent to factories in other large cities."
It is cut into dresses that are carried in bundles into tenement homes.
And such homes!
Often only one or two rooms for the whole family to cook and eat and sleep and sew in.

High up on the top floor of a rickety tenement 214 Elizabeth Street, NY. This mother and her two children, boy 10 years old and girl 12, were living in one tiny room and were finishing garments. The garments were packed under the bed and on top if it and around the room. Said they made from $1 to $2 a week and the boy earns some selling newspapers. I could not get their names. Lewis Hine Dec. 1912
Mothers sew the dresses, while their little girls help draw out the basting threads and sew on the buttons.

Family on Onofrio Cottone, 7 Extra Pl, NY. Finishing garments in a terribly run down tenement. The father works on the street. The three oldest children help the mother on garments. Joseph 14, Andrew 10, Rosie, 7 and all together they make about $2 a week when work is plenty. There are two babies. Lewis Hine, Jan 1913.
"Not long ago I read the story about Rose, nine years old, who sews buttons on little girls' dresses. Her mother used to make dolls dresses, and Rose had to snip them apart. She grew so tired of doing this for dolls for other little girls to play with, when she had no doll herself and when she wanted to read fairy stories, that what do you think she did? She snipped into the dolls' dresses with the scissors!
So now her mother makes big dresses, for little girls, and Rose cannot use the scissors, but must work with a needle. She sews on 36 buttons to earn 4 cents."

Jennie Rinaldi, 9 years old, helping mother and father finish garments in a dilapidated tenement, 8 Extra Pl., NYC They all work until 9 PM when busy, and make about $2 to $2.50 a week. Father works on street when he has work. Jennie was a truant, "I staid home 'cause a lady was comin." Lewis Hine, Jan. 1913
"The scallops of the embroidery trimming little girls like so well for their dresses," mother continued, "are cut out by children in tenement houses. These little girls generally go to school, but often fall asleep over their lessons because they worked long after bedtime the night before, and an hour or two before school in the morning.
The pretty ribbon trimmings are pulled through the dresses by children in still other tenement homes. You see, their mothers do not mean to be cruel, but they must pay rent and buy coal and bread and shoes with the money the children can earn.
More cruel than these poor mothers were the people who, when the fathers were little boys, made them do work that taught them nothing; for now the fathers do not know how to earn enough money, and they are idle while the children work.
"If only everybody cared, and would not buy things that children make, the factory men would give the work to the fathers and not to the children."

It is Fundamentally Wrong

It is a Contradiction of the Basic Principles of this Free Republic

That Upon the SHOULDERS of a CHILD Who Has Not Attained Full Physical Development Had a Reasonable Time for Play or Education

There Should Be Put the Smallest Fraction of the Burdens of our Modern Competitive Industrial Life.
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Mother also took me to a cotton mill, on that trip. I saw how the cotton bolls arc brought to the mill and the fluffy soft white mass is combed and then spun from on bobbin another, until it is the finest thread like the ravelings from the tear in my new dress.

The bobbins whirl around on large frames in the spinning room.

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http://www.history.ohio-state.edu/projects/childlabor/cottondress/
Photographs in this photo essay are part of the National Child Labor Committee Collection, one of the Prints and Photographs Division of the digital collections of the Library of Congress. The National Child Labor Committee Collection contains about 5,100 photographs taken between 1908 and 1924. The photographs, taken primarily by Lewis Hine, focus on children, showing workers, working and living conditions, and educational settings.

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