

**THROUGH THE
MILL**

THE LIFE OF A MILL-BOY

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THROUGH THE MILL



THEN THE EPILEPTIC OCTOGENARIAN LET ME GO AND THE PAUPER
LINE
WENT IN BEFORE THE PARISH CLERK FOR THE CHARITY SHILLING

Affectionately Dedicated

TO

MY WIFE

*“Still, all day, the iron wheels go onward,
Grinding life down from its mark;
And the children’s souls, which God is calling sunward,
Spin on blindly in the dark.”*

—E. B. BROWNING

Note

How many thousand pens are busy reporting and recording mill life! It is a splendid commentary on the fineness of our social conscience that there are so many champions on behalf of overworked boys and girls.

Coming now, to take its place among the multitudes of investigations and faithful records of factory life, is this frank, absolutely real and dispassionate Autobiography—written by a mill-boy who has lived the experiences of this book. So far as can be found this is the *first time that such an Autobiography has been printed in English*.

Since its appearance in the Outlook, the Autobiography has been entirely rewritten and new chapters have been added, so that the book will be practically new to anyone who chanced to read the Outlook chapters.

Chapter I. A Mixture of Fish, Wrangles, and Beer

MY tenth birthday was celebrated in northern England, almost within hailing distance of the Irish Sea. Chaddy Ashworth, the green-grocer's son, helped me eat the birthday cake, with the ten burnt currants on its buttered top.

As old Bill Scroggs was wont to boast: "Hadfield was in the right proper place, it being in the best shire in the Kingdom. Darby-shir (Derbyshire) is where Mr. George Eliot (only he said 'Helliot') got his 'Adam Bede' frum (only he said 'Hadam Bede'). Darby-shir is where Hum-fry Ward (he pronounced it 'Waard') placed the 'Histry o' Davvid Grieve.' If that don't top off the glory, it is Darby-shir that has geen to the waarld Florence Nightengale, Hangel of the British Harmy!"

It was in the first of those ten years that I had been bereft of my parents and had gone to live with my Aunt Millie and Uncle Stanwood. In commenting on her benevolence in taking me, Aunt Millie often said: "If it had been that none of my own four babbies had died, I don't know what you'd have done, I'm sure. I shouldn't have taken you!"

But there I was, a very lucky lad indeed to have a home with a middle-class tradesman in Station Road. My uncle's property consisted of a corner shop and an adjoining house. The door of

the shop looked out upon the main, cobbled thoroughfare, and upon an alleyway which ended at a coffin-maker's, where all the workhouse coffins were manufactured. We passed back and forth to the shop through a low, mysterious door, which in "The Mysteries of Udolpho" would have figured in exciting, ghostly episodes, so was it hidden in darkness in the unlighted storeroom from which it led. As for the shop itself, it was a great fish odor, for its counters, shelves and floor had held nothing else for years and years. The poultry came only in odd seasons, but fish was always with us: blue mussels, scalloped cockles, crabs and lobsters, mossy mussels, for shell fish: sole, conger eels, haddock, cod, mackerel, herring, shrimps, flake and many other sorts for the regular fish. Then, of course, there were the smoked kind: bloaters, red herrings, kippered herring, finnan haddock, and salt cod. In the summer the fish were always displayed outside, with ice and watercresses for their beds, on white platters. Then, too, there were platters of opened mussels a little brighter than gold in settings of blue. My uncle always allowed me to cut open the cod so that I might have the fishhooks they had swallowed. There was not a shopkeeper in the row that had half as much artistic window display skill as had Uncle Stanwood. He was always picking up "pointers" in Manchester. When the giant ray came in from Grimsby, the weavers were always treated to a window display twice more exciting than the butcher offered every Christmas, when he sat pink pigs in chairs in natural human postures, their bodies glorified in Christmas tinsel. Uncle Stanwood took those giant fish, monstrous, slimy, ugly nightmares, sat them in low chairs, with tail-flappers curled comically forward, with iron rimmed spectacles on their snouts, a dented derby aslant

beady eyes, and a warden's clay pipe prodded into a silly mouth—all so clownish a sight that the weavers and spinners never tired of laughing over it.

But while Uncle Stanwood was ambitious enough in his business, seeking "independence," which, to the British tradesman, represents freedom from work and therefore, "gentlemanliness," though he knew the fine art of window display and was a good pedler, he was never intended by nature to impress the world with the fact of his presence in it. He lacked will power. He was not self-assertive enough at critical times. The only time when he did call attention to himself was when he took "Bob," our one-eyed horse, and peddled fish, humorously shouting through the streets, "Mussels and cockles alive! Buy 'em alive! Kill 'em as you want 'em!" At all other times, the "Blue Sign" and the "Linnet's Nest," our public-houses, could lure him away from his business very readily. Uncle Stanwood had a conspicuous artistic nature and training, and it was in these public-houses where he could display his talents to the best advantage. He could play a flute and also "vamp" on a piano. True his flute-playing was limited to "Easy Pieces," and his piano "vamping" was little more than playing variations on sets of chords in all the various keys, with every now and then a one-finger-air, set off very well by a vamp, but he could get a perfunctory morsel of applause for whatever skill he had, and very few of the solo singers in concerts attempted to entertain in those public-houses without having "Stan" Brindin "tickle it up" for them. In regard to his piano-playing, uncle had unbounded confidence. He could give the accompaniment to the newest ballad without much difficulty. The singer would stand up before the piano

and say, "Stan, hast' 'eard that new piece, just out in t' music 'alls, 'The Rattling Seaman?'"

"No," uncle would say, "but I know I can 'vamp' it for thee, Jud. Hum it o'er a bar or two. What key is't in?" "I don't know *key*," would respond the singer, "but it goes like this," and there would ensue a humming during which uncle would desperately finger his set of chords, cocking his ear to match the piano with the singer's notes, and the loud crash of a fingerful of notes would suddenly indicate that connections had been made. Then, in triumph, uncle would say, "Let me play the Introduction, Jud!" and with remarkable facility he would stir the new air into the complex variations of his chords; he would "vamp" up and down, up and down, while the singer cleared his throat, smiled on the audience, and arranged his tie. Then pianist and singer, as much together as if they had been practising for two nights, would go together through a harmonious recital of how:

*"The Rattling Seaman's jolly as a friar,
As jolly as a friar is he, he, he."*

After the song, and the encore that was sure to follow, were done, uncle always had to share the singer's triumph in the shape of noggins of punch, and mugs of porter, into which a red hot poker from the coals had been stirred, and seasoned with pepper and salt. This would be repeated so many times in an evening that uncle soon became unfit for either piano or flute-playing, and I generally had to go for the flute the next morning before I went to school.

Uncle Stanwood had a golden age to which he often referred. In the first place, as a young bachelor he had traveled like a gentleman. His tour had included Ireland, France, and the Isle of Man. This was before he had learned to play a flute and piano and when public-houses were religiously abhorred. He was always repeating an experience that befell him in Ireland. I can record it verbatim. "I was walking along through a little hamlet when night came on. I saw one of them sod houses, and I knocked on the door. A blinking Irish woman asked me what I wanted. I told her, 'a night's lodging.' She pointed to a far corner in the sod house where a pig and some hens lay, and said to me, 'Ye can dossy down in the corner wid th' rist of the fam'ly!'" In its time there was no more vivid story that caught my imagination than that—pig, hens, and blinking Irish woman. About his Isle of Man experiences, uncle was always eloquent. Besides all else he had a ditty about it, to the accompaniment of which he often dandled me on his knee.

*"Aye, oh, aye! Lissen till I tell you
Who I am, am, am.
I'm a rovin' little darkey
All the way from Isle of Man.
I'm as free as anybody,
And they call me little Sam!"*

Previous to his marriage, also, he had been the teacher of a very large young men's class in one of the churches. That was his proudest boast, because, as explained to me over and over again in after years, "It was that work as a teacher that made me read a lot of mighty fine books. I had to prepare myself thoroughly, for those young fellows were reading philosophy,

religion, and the finest fiction. I had to keep ahead of them in some way. It is to that work that I owe what little learnin' I've got."

The inclinations toward the finer, sweeter things of life were wrapped up in uncle's character, but his will was not strong enough to keep him away from the public-house.

"That's my downfall," he said. "Oh, if I'd not learned to play the flute and the piano!" His art was his undoing; but never did his undoing smother his golden age. When almost incoherently drunk it was his habit to whimper, "I was better once—I was. I taught a young men's class. Look at me now!"

It always seemed to me that Aunt Millie was overstocked with the things that uncle lacked—will-power, assertiveness, and electric temper. She was positively positive in every part of her nature. She was positive that "Rule Britannia" should come next after "Nearer, my God, to Thee!" She was likewise positive as to the validity of her own ideas. Her mind, once made up—it did not take very long for that—was inflexible. The English landed nobility never had a more worshipful worshiper than my aunt. She was positive that it was one of our chief duties to "know our place," and "not try to be gentlemen and ladies when we don't have the right to be such." "It's no use passing yourself off as middle-classers if you arn't middle-classers and why should, on the other hand, a middle-classer try to pose as a gentleman?"

She was always reciting to me, as one of the pleasant memories she had carried off from her girlhood, how, when the carriage

of a squire had swept by, she had courtesied graciously and humbly.

“Did they bow to you, Aunt?” I asked.

“Bow to me!” she exclaimed, contemptuously, “who ever heard the likes!” Once she had seen a *real* lord! Her father had been one of those hamlet geniuses whose dreams and plans never get much broader recognition than his own fireside. He had built church organs, played on them, and had composed music. He had also made the family blacking, soap, ink, and many other useful necessities. He had also manufactured the pills with which the family cured its ills, pills of the old-fashioned sort of soap, sugar, and herb, compounded. Once he had composed some music for his church’s share in a national fête, on the merit of which, my aunt used to fondly tell me, *real* gentlemen would drive up to the door merely to have a glimpse at the old gentleman, much as if he had been Mendelssohn in retirement.

Aunt sent me daily to one or other of the public-houses for either a jug of ale or a pint of porter. Sometimes she took more than a perfunctory jug, and then she was on edge for a row instantly. When intoxicated she fairly quivered with jealousy, suspicion, and violent passion. One question touching on a delicate matter, one word injudiciously placed, one look of the eye, and she became a volcano of belligerent rage, belching profanity, and letting crockery or pieces of coal express what even her overloaded adjectives could not adequately convey. And when the storm had spent itself, she always relapsed into an excessive hysteria, which included thrillingly mad shrieks,

which my poor, inoffensive uncle tried to drown in showers of cold water.

"I've brought it all on myself," explained Uncle Stanwood, in explanation of his wife's intoxication. He then went on to explain how, when he had been courting, he had taken his fiancée on a holiday trip to the seaside. While there, in a beer-garden, he had pressed her to drink a small glass of brandy. "It all started from that," he concluded. "God help me!"

He certainly had to pay excessive interest on that investment, for if ever a mild man was nagged, or if ever a patient man had his temper tried, it was Uncle Stanwood. By my tenth birthday the house walls were no longer echoing with peace, for there were daily tirades of wrath and anger about the table.

These family rows took many curious turns. In them my aunt, well read in Dickens, whose writings were very real and vivid to her, freely drew from that fiction master's gallery of types, and fitted them to uncle's character. "Don't sit there a-rubbin' your slimy hands like Uriah Heep!" she would exclaim; or, "Yes, there you go, always and ever a-sayin' that something's bound to turn up, you old Micawber, you!" But this literary tailoring was not at all one-sided, for uncle was even better read than his wife, and with great effect he could say, "Yes, there you go, always insinuatn' everlastingly, like Becky Sharp," and the drive was superlatively effective in that uncle well knew that Thackeray's book was aunt's favorite. I heard him one day compare his wife to Mrs. Gamp, loving her nip of ale overmuch, and on another occasion she was actually included among Mrs. Jarley's wax-works!

There was a curious streak of benevolence in my aunt's nature, a benevolence that concerned itself more with strangers than with those in her own home. I have seen her take broths and meats to neighbors, when uncle and I have had too much buttered bread and preserves. I have seen her take her apron with her to a neighbor's, where she washed the dishes, while her own had to accumulate, to be later disposed of with my assistance. There was a shiftless man in the town, the town-crier, who would never take charity outright. Him did aunt persuade to come and paint rural scenes, highly colored with glaring tints, as if nature had turned color-blind. There were cows in every scene, and aunt noticed that all the cows were up to their knees in water. Not one stood clear on the vivid green hills.

"Torvey," she remarked to the old man, "why do you always put the cows in water?" The old artist responded, "It's this way, Mrs. Brindin, you see, ma'am, I never learnt to paint 'oofs!" As a further benevolence towards this same man, she kept on hand a worn-out clock, for him to earn a penny on. After each tinkering the clock was never known to run more than a few minutes after the old man had left. But aunt only laughed over it, and called Torvey "summat of a codger, to be sure!"

I attended a low brick schoolhouse which in spring and summer time was buried in a mass of shade, with only the tile chimneys free from a coat of ivy. The headmaster gave us brief holidays, when he had us run races for nuts. In addition to the usual studies I was taught darning, crocheting, plain sewing, and knitting. Every Monday morning I had to take my penny for tuition.

Outside of school hours there were merry times, scraping sparks on the stone flags with the irons of our clogs, going to the butcher's every Tuesday morning, at the slaughter-house, where he gave us bladders to blow up and play football with; and every now and then he would ask us to lay hold of the rope and help in felling a bull across the block. The only apple I ever saw growing in England hung over a brick wall in a nest of leaves—a red crab no bigger than a nutmeg. I used to visit that wall with my companions, but not to try for that apple—it was too sacred in our eyes for that—but to admire it, as it bent up and down in the wind, and to wonder how many more were inside the wall among the larger branches. On Saturdays, after I had brightened the stone hearth with blue-stone and sand, I went out to greet the Scotch bag-piper who, with his wheezy pibroch, puffed out like a roasted Christmas goose, perambulated down our road so sedately that the feather in his plaid bonnet never quivered. As this did not take up all the morning, we borrowed bread-knives from our families, and went to the fields, where we dug under the sod, amongst the fresh, damp soil, for groundnuts, while the soaring lark dropped its sweet note down on us.

But the gala days were the holidays, filled as only the English know how to fill them with high romance and pure fun. There were the Sunday-school "treats," when we went to the fields in holiday clothes and ran, leaped, and frolicked for prize cricket balls and bats, and had for refreshment currant buns and steaming coffee. There was the week at the seashore, when aunt and uncle treated me to a rake, shovel, and colored tin pail, for my use on the shore in digging cockles, making sand mountains, and in erecting pebble breastworks to keep back

the tide. To cap all else as a gala opportunity, full of color, noise, music, and confusion, came Glossop Fair, to which I went in a special train for children. There I dodged between the legs of a bow-legged, puffy old man to keep up with the conductor of our party, and I spent several pennies on shallow glasses filled with pink ices, which I licked with such assiduity that my tongue froze at the third consecutive glass. I was always given pennies enough to be able to stop at the stalls to buy a sheep's trotter, with vinegar on it; to eat a fried fish, to get a bag of chipped potatoes, delicious sticks of gold, covered with nice-tasting grease, and to buy a Pan's pipe, a set of eight-reed whistles on which, though I purchased several sets, I was never able to attain to the dignity and the thrill of so simple a tune as "God Save the Queen." The grand climax of the fair, the very *raison d'être*, were the fairy shows, held under dirty canvases, with red-nosed barkers snapping worn whips on lurid canvases whereon were pictured: "Dick Whittington and His Cat," at the famous milestone, with a very impressionistic London town in the haze, but inevitable for Dick and His Cat; or "Jack and the Beanstalk," showing a golden-haired prince in blue tights and a cloud of a giant reaching out a huge paw to get the innocent youth and cram him down his cavernous maw.

"Ere you are, Ladies and Gents!" screamed the barker, pattering nervously and significantly on these pictures, "Only 'riginal 'Dick Whittington and His Cat,' Lord Mayor o' Lunnon! Grown ups a penny, childer 'arf price! Step up all! The band will play! 'Ere you are, now! Tickets over there!"

My tenth birthday marked the end of my boyish, merry play-life. Over its threshold I was to meet with and grasp the

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