

THE LOWELL OFFERING.

By Harriet H. Robinson.

THE history of the *Lowell Offering* can hardly be written without some reference to the life of the community in which the publication of such a unique magazine became possible. At the time the Lowell water-power was utilized, the era of mechanical invention had not begun. The industrial life of New England was yet in its infancy, and almost every article in daily use that is now made with the help of machinery was then "done by hand." It was a rural population, and the material for clothing was grown on the home farm, and spun and woven by the women. Even in wealthy families the sons were sent to college in suits of homespun, cut and made by the village seamstress; and every household was a self-producing

and self-sustaining community. "Homespun was their only wear," homespun their lives.

There was neither railroad, steamboat, telegraph, nor telephone; and direct communication was kept up by the lumbering stage-coach or the slow-toiling canal which tracked its sinuous way from town to city and from state to state. The daily paper was almost unknown, and the "news of the day" was usually a week or so behind the times. Money was scarce, and most of the retail business was done by "barter": so many eggs for a certain quantity of sugar; or so much butter or farm produce for tea, coffee, and other luxuries. The people had plenty to eat; for the land, though sterile, was well cultivated; but if the children wanted books, or a better education than the village school could give them, the farmer seldom had the means to gratify their wishes.

These early New Englanders lived in pastoral simplicity. They were moral, religious, and perhaps content. They could say with truth —

"We are the same things that our fathers have been,
We see the same sights that our fathers have seen,
We drink the same stream, we feel the same sun,
And run the same course that our fathers have run."

Their lives had kept pace for so many years with the slow old canal, that they thought, no doubt, if they thought about it at all, that they should crawl along in this way forever. But into this life there came an element that was to create a new era in the activities of the country.

It was the genius of mechanical industry, which would build the cotton-factory, set in motion the loom and the spinning-frame, call together an army of useful people, open wider fields of industry for men and, what was quite as important at that time, for women also. For the mechanical industries were not yet opened to women, there being, even as late as 1840, only seven employments outside the home into which the women of this country had entered.

It was from such conditions that the early factory population of New England was made up. The "girls" (as well as the "boys") were of English or Scotch descent, and had inherited the adventurous

spirit of their ancestors, with the determination to better their condition if occasion offered. They had early been taught that "work is no disgrace," and when stories reached them of

"This wonderful city of spindles and looms,
And thousands of factory folks,"

where they could earn money, they soon began to go there; and in a little while the Lowell factories were well filled with energetic young women.

We can to-day hardly realize what a change the cotton-factory made in the status of the working-woman. Hitherto woman had always been a money-saving rather than a money-earning member of the community; and now, for the first time in this country, the labor of woman, as a class, had a money value. She had become not only an earner and producer, but also a spender of money, a recognized factor in the political economy of her time.

But there were other and older women who sought this new employment, lonely and dependent ones who in old wills used to be mentioned as "incumbrances" and "relicts," and to whom the chance of "earning money" was indeed a new revelation. How well I remember some of these solitary ones, — and they serve to illustrate the condition of all women at that time: — a widow, perhaps, who had been left an "incumbrance" on the farm which she had helped her husband to earn, or a sister left with a home there, as her only share of the paternal estate. As a child of eleven years, I often made fun of them (for children do not see the pathetic side of human nature) and imitated their limp carriage and inelastic gait. I can see them now, even after fifty years, just as they looked, — depressed, modest, mincing, hardly daring to look one in the face, so shy and sylvan had been their lives. But after the first payday came, and they had felt the jingle of silver in their pockets, their bowed heads were lifted, their necks seemed braced with steel, they looked you in the face, sang blithely among their looms or frames, and walked with elastic step to and from their work. And when Sunday came, how sedately gay in their new attire they walked to church, and how proudly they dropped their silver fourpences into the contribution box!

While the majority of the younger "girls"



"Is Saul also among the prophets?"

A REPOSITORY
OF ORIGINAL ARTICLES, WRITTEN BY
"FACTORY GIRLS."

LOWELL: MISSES CURTIS & FARLEY.
BOSTON: JORDAN & WILEY, 121
Washington street.
1845.

Entered according to Act of Congress, in the year 1845, in the Clerk's Office of the District Court
of the District of Massachusetts.

were farmers' daughters, there were a few who were not country girls. Lucy Larcom came from Beverly, her mother being the widow of a sea captain; and my own mother moved from Boston, my native place, in 1832, with her little flock of fatherless children, to open a boarding-house, and thus earn their bread and give them a better education than she could earn for them in Boston.

Most of these women, both young and old, had some object in working in the factory besides using the money they would earn for mere dress and adornments. Some desired to become better educated, others worked that a brother or a son might be sent to college, and still others to maintain the younger children or the father and mother on the home farm. But there were not a few who came to Lowell on account of the circulating libraries that were soon opened, the lyceum lectures, and the social advantages to be found in the companionship of those of similar tastes with themselves. And there is no doubt that the society of one another was of great advantage to these girls. They discussed the books they read, debated religious and social questions, compared their thoughts and experiences, and advised and helped one another. And so their mental growth went on and they soon became educated far beyond what their mothers or their grandmothers could have been. It was fortunate for them that they were obliged to read good books, such as histories, the English classics, and the very few American novels that were then in existence. Cheap editions of Scott were but just publishing; Frederika Bremer was hardly translated; Harriet Beecher Stowe was busy in her nursery, and the great American novel was not written, nor yet the small one, — which was indeed a great blessing.

It was not long before numbers of these girls began to feel the benefit of the educational advantages which had been opened to them. They had learned much at the evening schools, attended the lyceum lectures, and continued their studies during their yearly vacation, or kept them up while at their work in the mill. Their work was monotonous and was done almost mechanically, but their thoughts were free and they had ample time to digest what they learned, or to think over what they had read. Their minds were not crammed, and an idea had

a chance to "turn round" before another came to crowd it out or take its place.

In 1836 Miss Harriot F. Curtis and a few of her immediate associates conceived the idea of forming a little society for "mutual improvement," where they could meet together at stated intervals, submit to each other what they had written, or talk over the books they had read. The society was regularly organized, with officers, a constitution and by-laws, and its object was declared to be a desire on the part of its members "to improve the talents God had given them." Miss Curtis was the president of this society, which was the first woman's club on record, at least in this country.

Shortly after this the Rev. Abel C. Thomas and the Rev. Thomas B. Thayer, pastors of the first and second Universalist Churches in Lowell, established improvement circles composed of the young people belonging to their respective parishes. These meetings were largely made up of young women who worked in the mill. They were often asked to speak, but as they persistently declined, they were invited to write what they desired to say, and send it, to be read anonymously at the next meeting. Many complied with this request, and these written communications were so numerous that they very soon became the sole entertainment of what Mr. Thomas called "these intellectual banquets."

In 1843 there were at least five of these improvement circles in different parts of the city. I attended one of these circles as late as 1846, I think, for I was not an early member, nor was I a frequent contributor to the *Lowell Offering*. The circle met in a large room in some public building, and was well filled with factory operatives, some of whom had brought their contributions and waited to hear them read, no doubt with quaking hearts and conscious faces. Miss Farley presided, and from a pile of manuscript on the table before her selected such contributions as she thought the most worthy of a public reading. Among these, as I remember, were the chapters of a novel, by Miss Curtis, one of Lucy Larcom's prose poems, and some "pieces of poetry." Included in these pieces were some verses in which the wind was described as playing havoc with nature to such an extent that

"It took the tall trees by the hair
And as with besoms swept the air."

This tremendous breeze, or simile, caused a good deal of mirth among the younger contributors, who had never heard of *The World-Soul*, nor read Emerson's line —

"To the green-haired forest free,"

nor Longfellow's *The Building of the Ship*, where he speaks of the pine-trees as

"Shorn of their streaming hair."

A selection from the articles read at these circles was soon published in pamphlet form, under the joint editorship of Mr. Thomas and Mr. Thayer, and called the *Lowell Offering*. The first number was issued in October, 1840, the last in December, 1849. There are seven volumes in all.

It may be well to mention, for the sake of historical accuracy, that in 1842 a sort of rival publication was started by some persons of a different religious denomination, whose doctrines prejudiced them against the Universalist editors of the *Lowell Offering*. It lived only a year, however, when it was consolidated with the original magazine.

Mr. Thomas and Mr. Thayer conducted the *Offering* two years, and then it passed into the hands of Miss Harriet Farley and Miss Harriot F. Curtis, both operatives in the Lowell mills. All the articles in the *Offering* were written by mill-girls. In speaking of this matter, its first editor, Mr. Thomas, says: "Communications much amended, in process of training the writers, were rigidly excluded from print, and such articles only were published as had been written by females employed in the mills." He continues: "And thus was published not only the first work written by factory girls, but also the first magazine or journal written exclusively by women in all the world."

The *Offering* was a small, thin magazine, with one column to the page. The price of the first number was six and a quarter cents. Its title-page was plain, with a motto from Gray, the verse beginning, —

"Full many a gem of purest ray serene."

This motto was used for two years, when another was adopted: —

"Is Saul also among the prophets?"

In January, 1845, the magazine had on its outside cover a vignette, adopted, as the editor said, to represent the New England school-girl, "of which our factory-girls are made, standing near a bee-hive, emblem of industry and intelligence, and in the background the Yankee school-house, church and factory." The motto was: —

"The worm on the earth
May look up to the star."

This rather abject sentiment, however, was not suited to the independent spirit of most of the contributors, and in the February number it was changed to one from Bunyan: —

"And do you think that the words of your book are certainly true? Yea, verily."

The magazine finally died, however, with its favorite motto: —

"Is Saul also among the prophets?"

The title-page, or outside cover, was copyrighted in 1845.

The *Lowell Offering* was welcomed by the press, and found subscribers in all parts of this country and in England. The *North American Review* said: "Many of the articles are such as to satisfy the reader at once, that if he has only taken up the *Offering* as a phenomenon, and not as what may bear criticism and reward perusal, he has but to own his error, and dismiss his condescension as soon as may be." Other leading publications also spoke well of its literary merits. Harriet Martineau prompted a fine review of it in the *London Athenæum*, and a selection from its pages was published, under her direction, called *Mind Among the Spindles*. When Dickens visited this country, in 1842, he went into the Lowell factories, and a copy of the *Offering* was presented to him. He speaks of it as follows: "They have got up among themselves a periodical, called the *Lowell Offering*, whereof I brought away from Lowell four hundred good solid pages, which I have read from beginning to end. Of the merits of the *Lowell Offering*, as a literary production, I will only observe, — putting out of sight the fact of the articles having been written by these girls after the arduous hours of the day, — that it will compare advantageously with a great many English annuals." Dr. Scoresby, in his work on *American Factories and their Female Operatives*, says, "Without any

allowance for the fact that it is the work of young women engaged for thirteen or fourteen hours a day in their occupation, the *Lowell Offering* stands commended, in every part of it, for its propriety of sentiment and language, high moral tone, vividness of natural feeling, good sense, descriptive cleverness, and the innocent playfulness with which some of its contributions are characterized."

It was considered good Sunday reading, also, particularly for the children. A lady has told me, within a year, that as a child she used to watch for its coming, and how much she liked it, because her father, a clergyman, allowed her to read it on Sunday. Another has said that she used to get the themes for her "compositions" out of the pages of the *Lowell Offering*. The fact was sometimes disputed, that a factory-girl could write for or edit a magazine; and letters were sent to the editor, inquiring whether he revised or re-wrote the articles. In the preface to the first volume, he answers the question thus: "The articles are all written by factory-girls; we do not revise or re-write them, and we have taken less liberty with them than editors usually take with others than the most experienced writers."

The *Lowell Offering* did a good work not only among the operatives themselves, but among the rural population from which they had been drawn. It was almost the only magazine that reached their secluded homes, where it was loaned from house to house, read and re-read, and thus set the women to thinking, and added its little leaven of progressive thought to the times in which it lived. Its influence or its memory is not forgotten; and if a newspaper or magazine which had so brief an existence is so well remembered after almost fifty years, when the novelty of such a publication is all worn away, it shows that it must have had some vitality, something in it worthy of preservation.

Though the literary character of these writings may not rise to the present standard of such productions, yet still at that season of intellectual dearth they must have had an influence on current literature. For we must remember that very few modern American authors had then made their mark, and that the literary magazines of that time, with the exception, perhaps, of the *North American Review* and the *Dial*,

were mostly devoted to the lightest kind of literature. We must also remember, if any apology is necessary, that these writings are the crude attempts of those who were but children in literature, and the wonder is that what they wrote is half as good as it is.

The *Lowell Offering* was a literary curiosity at the time of its publication, and no doubt will always hold that place among American publications.

These authors represent what may be called the poetic element of factory life. They were the ideal mill-girls, full of hopes, desires, aspirations,—poets of the loom, spinners of verse, artists of factory life; and without claiming too much credit for them, it is but fair that some attempt should be made, as another has said, "to reveal the halo which should extend to us from this representative body of New England women."

There is a certain flavor in the articles which reminds one of the books which these factory-girl authors were in the habit of reading. The verses savor of Mrs. Hemans, Mrs. Sigourney, Miss Landon, Milton, Pope, or Hannah More, while the prose models seem to have been *The Spectator*, Miss Sedgwick's *Letters*, *The Vicar of Wakefield*, Lydia Maria Child's writings, Stevens's *Travels*, etc. The contributions are on a great variety of subjects: allegory, art, conversations on the sciences, translations, reformatory, moral, and religious subjects, stories of farm and factory life, verses, sketches of local New England history, and sometimes the chapters of a novel. The criticism was sometimes made that the operatives wrote too much about the beauties of nature; but to this the writers might have answered with Emerson:—

"And be sure the all-loving nature
Will smile in a factory."

These factory-girl writers did not confine their talents within the pages of their own publication. Many of them wrote for the literary newspapers, and they also became authors of books, seven of these having been published by them before 1848. The names of forty-nine of the contributors to the *Lowell Offering* are preserved; and among these the following have been also the authors of books: Harriet F. Curtis, Lucy Larcom, Eliza G. Cate, Harriet Far-

ley, Abba A. Goddard, and Harriet H. Robinson.

Nearly all of the contributors left the factory before 1850, to enter the life for which they had been preparing themselves. One, Margaret F. Foley, became an artist of note ; another, the founder of a free public library in her native town ; a third went as missionary to the Cherokees, and was afterward a pioneer in Kansas. Some became teachers, or went into other employments that were opening to women. Those who married have made, no doubt, as good wives, mothers, and grandmothers

as the average ; and some of them are and have been well known as doing good and successful work outside the domestic sphere.

They are widely scattered. I hear of them as living in the far West, in the South, and even in foreign countries. But wherever they are, I know that they will join with me in saying that the discipline of their youth has helped to make them what they are ; that the cotton-factory was to them a means of education, their *alma mater*, or preparatory school, in which they learned the alphabet of their life work.

