Historical Fiction Play
The Dangerous Life of Harriet Hanson, 10-Year-Old Mill Girl

At a time when children worked in deadly mills, factories, and mines, one brave girl fought for change

By Spencer Kayden

CHARACTERS

*Narrators 1, 2, and 3 (N1, N2, N3)  
*Historians 1 and 2  
Mr. Trott: an overseer at the mill  
*Harriet Hanson: a young girl  
Lucy: a teenage mill girl  
Margaret: a teenage mill girl  
Plumy: a 12-year-old country girl  
Factory Owner  
Sarah: a strike organizer  
All Mill Girls  
*Indicates large speaking role

Scene 1

N1: It’s 4:30 in the morning.  
Ten-year-old Harriet Hanson hears the harsh clanging of the factory bell.  
N2: Her eyes fly open. She jumps up from the small bed she shares with her mother.  
N3: Even in the dark, Harriet knows where the candles are. She lights one so she can find her dress and button it up. Then she quickly laces up her one pair of boots.  
N1: Harriet runs downstairs to meet up with the other girls. She is excited and nervous.  
N2: Today is her first day of work at the mill.  
Historian 1: In Lowell, Massachusetts, in the 1830s, factories started to spring up along the Merrimack River.  
Historian 2: Townspeople had never seen buildings this massive before—five- and six-story brick behemoths.  
Historian 1: In these textile mills, raw cotton was turned into finished cloth.  
Historian 2: Each factory hired hundreds of workers to run its machinery.  
Historian 1: Most of these workers were young girls, like Harriet, who were growing up in New England.  
Historian 2: They were cheap to hire, and they had small hands and nimble fingers.
At the factory, Harriet approaches Mr. Trott.

Mr. Trott: Harriet, since you are so small, you will be a bobbin girl. You know what a bobbin is, don’t you?

Harriet: It’s a big spool that catches the thread.

Mr. Trott: That’s right. Come with me.

Mr. Trott leads Harriet to the bottom floor of the factory.

When Harriet enters the spinning room, she is nearly blown over by the roar of noise: clanking and rumbling and buzzing sounds of pulleys and rollers and spindles.

Mr. Trott: Your job will be to take these bobbins full of thread off the spinning frames and replace them with empty ones.

Harriet: The bobbins are bigger than I am! Mr. Trott: If you can’t lift them, I’m sure I can find someone who can.

Harriet: No, I can! I can!

Mr. Trott: We stop the machine briefly for you to change the bobbin. But you must work quickly. Every second those machines are stopped, the company loses money.

Scene 2

Historian 1: Most mill girls lived in boardinghouses, large homes built by the factory owners where 30 or 40 workers lived.

Historian 2: Widows, like Harriet’s mother, cooked and cleaned for the workers.

N1: Each day, Harriet starts work at 5 a.m.

N2: Harriet’s body aches, but she is proud to be earning money for her family.

N3: One afternoon, Harriet is crawling under the dangerous spinning machines, cleaning up dust and loose thread.

N1: Sweat drips down her forehead. It is 95 degrees inside the mill.

N2: The windows are nailed shut, and hot steam is sprayed in the air so the thread doesn’t dry out and break.

N3: Suddenly, Harriet hears a piercing scream.

Lucy: Someone help! It’s Emeline!

N1: Harriet runs over and sees Emeline trembling. Her hand is caught in the spinning machine. There is blood everywhere.

Harriet: What happened?!

Lucy: She fainted!

Margaret: She’s exhausted, and she has inhaled so much lint from working here that she can’t breathe very well.

N2: Mr. Trott comes and carries Emeline away.

N3: As soon as she is gone, her machine is turned back on and another girl steps into her place.

Scene 3

N1: Weeks later, Harriet is having supper
Scene 4

Historian 1: As the town of Lowell grew, competition among the mills became fierce.

Historian 2: Factory owners struggled to find ways to sell their cloth and keep profits up.

Factory Owner: Trott, I’ve had to lower our prices. The girls need to make more cloth.

Mr. Trott: I’ve already made them speed up their work. And many of them are tending three or four looms at a time.

Factory Owner: They must work faster.

Mr. Trott: Sir, that will produce lumpy thread and uneven cloth. You won’t be able to sell it.

Factory Owner: Then there’s no other way; we will have to cut their wages.

N2: The girls huddle together during a break.

Margaret: I heard something terrible!

Plumy: What?

Margaret: They are cutting our pay 15 percent.

Lucy: But then our wages will be only about a dollar a week!

Margaret: But that’s not the worst of it. The owners are going to make us pay more to live in their boardinghouses.

Plumy: What can we do about it?

N1: Margaret glances around to make sure the overseer is not nearby.

Margaret (whispering): The girls working upstairs are organizing a “turn out”!

Plumy: What’s that?

Margaret: A strike, where we walk out of the mill and refuse to work. If all the girls in the factory do it, the owners will have to pay attention to us.

Lucy (gasping): Go on strike? We’ll get fired for sure!

Margaret: Lucy, the corporation is not treating us fairly. Shouldn’t we stand up for our rights?

Lucy: What if we’re blacklisted? Nobody else will hire us. We won’t be able to earn money!
Margaret: The girls upstairs have created a group called the Factory Girls’ Association. They say they will help all the girls who turn out.

Plumy: I can’t stop working. The money I send home is putting my brother through college.

Lucy: Plus, if we strike, we’ll be kicked out of the boardinghouse. Then we’ll be broke and have nowhere to live. We’ll all starve!

Margaret: I know it sounds scary, but if we don’t look out for ourselves, who will?

Harriet: Plumy, would you want to go to college?

Plumy: No one has ever asked me that. Everyone expects me to get married and keep house.

Harriet: I think it would be wonderful to learn about things like art and science and history.

Plumy: Women can’t even vote, Harriet. What makes you think anyone is interested in our improving our minds?

**Scene 5**

N3: The day of the strike arrives. At the stroke of 11 o’clock, the girls on the upper floors stop working. Their machines grind to a halt.

N1: Harriet watches out the window as a stream of girls file out of the mill.

N2: Her heart is pounding.

N3: As more girls leave, the machinery stops and the normally deafening sounds of the

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**Danger in the Fields**

1.5 million U.S. kids and teens work to put food on your table

Thanks to crusaders like Harriet Hanson, strict child labor laws forbid children under 16 from working in most jobs. But these laws don’t apply to farms, where kids as young as 12 are legally allowed to work as many as 12 hours a day.

An estimated 1.5 million of these young workers labor on American farms today. They work grueling hours, often in blistering heat. Many of these kids are “migrant workers,” traveling from farm to farm with their families to harvest fruits and vegetables.

The work isn’t just exhausting—it’s often dangerous. Some teens operate chainsaws and other machines, drive tractors, or climb 20-foot ladders to reach the tops of apple or pear trees.

But many young workers are grateful for the wages that help their families survive. “I’m proud of what I did,” says Veronica Garcia, of Roma, Texas, who worked the cotton fields with her family last summer. Even so, Veronica is eager to speak out for tougher laws to protect young workers and for better pay for all.

“Everyone should know what life is like for kids who are farmworkers and about the abuses they face,” she says.
Imagine you were working with Harriet. Would you have joined the strike? Why or why not? Write your answer in a paragraph, using details from the play. Send your entry to “Harriet Contest” by December 15, 2011. Ten winners will each receive a copy of Lyddie by Katherine Paterson. See page 2 for details.

mill stop. The silence is eerie.
N1: The girls on Harriet’s floor are hesitant.
    Even Margaret is worried.
Margaret: Well, shall we turn out?
Plumy: If I get fired, my family will never forgive me.
Lucy: How will we survive with no jobs?
N2: Harriet surprises everyone by exclaiming loudly.
Harriet: I am going to turn out, whether anyone else does or not!
N3: She marches out with her head held high.
N1: Once out in the yard, Harriet turns around and sees hundreds of spinners from her floor in a long line behind her. She swells with pride.
N2: Nearly 2,000 mill girls march through the streets, singing and chanting.
N3: Sarah, one of the strike organizers, climbs onto a water pump so she can be heard.
Sarah: The factory owners want to make more money, so they are cutting our pay!
All Mill Girls: Boooooo!
Sarah: We are not machines!
All Mill Girls: No!
Sarah: We are human beings with rights and feelings. And we will not return to work until they agree to pay us what is fair!
All Mill Girls: Hooray!

Epilogue

Historian 1: After the strike, the factory owners still decided to cut the girls’ pay.
Historian 2: The strikers were discouraged. Some quit and went home. Others went back to work because they had no other options.
Historian 1: Even though the strike was not a success, it was the start of something much bigger. The workers had fought back.
Historian 2: The movement that Harriet and the other protesters started was like a seed that would grow and grow. They knew they mustn’t give up the struggle.
Historian 1: Harriet kept her job at the mill for many years, and she continued to champion the rights of the workers.
Historian 2: The Factory Girls’ Association became more and more powerful. Eventually, it was able to convince the government to limit the working day to just 10 hours.
Historian 1: Throughout the rest of her life, Harriet crusaded against slavery and for women’s rights. In the end, she never forgot how it felt that day when she and the other girls walked out of the factory.
Harriet: I was more proud than I have ever been since at any success I may have achieved.

WRITE TO WIN!

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