

# FALL RIVER,

AN

## AUTHENTIC NARRATIVE.

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"TALES, NATIONAL, REVOLUTIONARY," &c. &c.

"Oh for a Lodge in some vast wilderness,  
Some boundless continuity of shade,  
Where rumour of oppression and deceit  
Can never reach me more,  
My soul is sick with every day's report  
Of the world's baseness."

### "Murder in a Mill Town" Documents

#### THE CHANGING NATURE OF WOMEN'S WORK

##### Documents:

1. Catherine Williams, *Fall River. An Authentic Narrative* (1833), 76-86, 122-23 (Letter No. 5), 195-97.
2. Gurdon Williams, *Brief and Impartial Narrative of the Life of Sarah Maria Cornell*, 1-9.
3. Orestes Brownson, "Laboring Classes," *Boston Quarterly Review* 3 (July 1840).
4. *The Lowell Offering* - "Factory Girls," (Dec. 1840).
5. *The Lowell Offering* - "The Spirit of Discontent," (1841).
6. "New Song of the Factory Girl," (Broadside/Ballad)
7. "The Factory Girl." (Broadside/Ballad)
8. Benjamin F. Hallett, *A Full Report of the Trial of Ephraim K. Avery* (1833), 115-118.

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1833.

to the best society. Unhappily, she contracted early in life an unfortunate attachment. Mr. Cornell was a person employed in one of the manufacturing and of pleasing address, he succeeded in captivating the affections of a daughter of his employer. Mr. Leffingwell was at first very wroth, and made considerable opposition to the match, but upon being assured by his daughter that she was firmly and immovably attached to Cornell and could never be happy with any other man, the old gentleman gave up the contest, and suffered the union to take place without further opposition. His daughter removed after marriage to Vermont, where her children were born; and here she was destined to taste the bitterness of an ill assorted union. Her husband it seemed had formed the design, and it very soon developed, to be supported from his father-in-law's funds, which were supposed inexhaustible, and himself to be a gentleman at large. In pursuit of this determination he worked upon the feelings of his wife to get her to draw money from her father. Mrs. Cornell, who was one of those gentle, unresisting characters that knew not how to contend, suffered herself for some time, though sorely against her feelings, to be influenced to this, and repeatedly drew large sums of money from her indulgent father, to supply her husband's demands, until at length the old gentleman resolutely refused to advance any more; upon which Cornell carried his wife and children to her father's house, and leaving them, quit the country, and relieved himself forever from the task of supporting a woman whom he had probably married without the least sentiment of affection whatever, and abandoning the children in

## CHAPTER V.

## LIFE OF SARAH MARIA CORNELL.

With the greatest care and impartiality the author of the following pages has collected together all the facts susceptible of proof relating to the life of Sarah Maria Cornell. Some of these were gained from her own family—others from strangers.

S. M. CORNELL was born in May 1802, in Rupert, Vermont. Her mother, the daughter of Christopher Leffingwell, Esq. of Norwich,\* was a well educated and good principled woman, a daughter to one of the first families in the State. She had been carefully brought up and accustomed only

\* This Christopher Leffingwell was the direct descendant of that Thomas Leffingwell of Saybrook, Connecticut, who had the honor of rescuing by his bravery the celebrated Uncas, with his remnant of Mohicans, from the power of the Narragansetts, in the bloody war between the Indians of this last tribe and the new settlers, the English, about the year 1680; and who received afterwards, as a testimony of gratitude from that renowned warrior, the grant of land, by deed, of all that tract upon which the town of Norwich now stands. New-England is under lasting obligations to the name of Leffingwell. The circumstances were these.

Uncas, who with his band was fighting in defence of the whites, got hemmed in, in a place of imminent danger, at some distance from Saybrook, but found means to send a messenger to that place to ask the English there to come to his relief. Their whole force had left the place, in another direction, except those left to guard the fort. But Thomas Leffingwell formed the bold plan of conveying the whole band across into the fort, in the course of the night in his canoe, and actually accomplished it; and when the ferocious Narragansetts came upon their post, in the morning, behold they were gone! all safely stowed into the English fort at Saybrook. This manœuvre turned the tide of war.

their helpless infancy, whom the laws of God, and the laws of the land both required him to support. What was the situation of Mr. Leffingwell's estate at his decease, we do not know, or whether he supposed he had bestowed enough upon this daughter; but certain it is that although the rest of the family were in easy circumstances, if not affluent, she and her family were poor, and she and her children found a home with some of their relatives, and appear to have looked chiefly to their own exertions for support. They were separated, being all brought up at different places, and not even knowing one another for several years. The unfortunate girl who is the subject of this memoir was in the same house with her mother until about eleven years of age. She then went to live with a Mrs. Lathrop of Norwich, her mother's sister. With her she continued until fifteen years of age, and then went to learn the tailor's trade, where she staid two years, and then for a time resided with her mother in Bozrah, a short distance from Norwich, working at her trade.

During her residence at the house where she learned her trade, her mind appeared for the first time called up to attend to religion. There was at the time a great reformation, as it is termed, in the neighbourhood—that is, there was a great stir about religion, and much going to meeting, and many professing, of which number doubtless many continued steadfast; but in a time of such general excitement it is known there is a great deal of self-deception. The quick feelings and sanguine temperament of S. M. Cornell were calculated to mislead her, and it was not long before she rushed with the multitude to the altar of baptism, joining herself

in christian communion to the congregation of the Rev. Mr. Austin, a Calvinistic Congregationalist. No reproach can with justice attach itself to a clergyman in such cases, unless they are hurried into such a profession without any time for trial, which was not the case in this instance. Man cannot look into futurity and tell who will prove steadfast and who will not, and if a rational person makes a good profession of faith, and avows a resolution to lead a christian life, the minister is bound to receive them, unless he knows something in their present character and conduct at variance with their professions. For two years she continued steadfast, and it was said a bright example in outward conduct; yet nevertheless the seed had fallen on stony ground, where the earth was not of sufficient depth to foster it. A season of declension succeeded it. Lightness and vanity again took possession of her imagination. A passion for dress at this time seemed to be a predominant feeling, and that passion she was obliged to set bounds to, because she had not the means of gratifying it.

It was at this unfortunate season, the only one it is believed in her existence when the same temptation would have had the same weight, that her mother brought her to Providence. Her older sister lived there with a relation who had brought her up; and these two sisters, separated for many years, had long desired a reunion. That wish, so natural, was at last indulged, and like most of our earnest desires for earthly gratification, indulged to their mutual sorrow. Introduced for the first time since childhood into the temptations and allurements of a commercial town, those feelings of childish vanity, and love of dress, and show, and ornament, which had

been growing upon her for some time, seemed completely to get the mastery—and being often in the shops where those articles for which she had so long sighed presented themselves before her—she at length possessed herself of some of them, trifling indeed in amount, but destined to prove her entire destruction in this world as respected character and every thing else. Though the whole of these articles purloined in a moment of lightness, of thoughtlessness and temptation, did not exceed in amount but a very few dollars, it was immediately discovered, and the avenger was close upon her heels. Unused to crime, her manner at the time was so singular and agitated as to excite suspicion in the store, and she was followed to the house of one of her relatives, where the articles were found—not exceeding five dollars in amount, and several very small trifles beside, which she immediately told of, and where she got them, and her friends sent them to the gentlemen, and offered to pay all damages, &c. to both; they exacted nothing however but the amount of the goods. The grief and agitation of the poor girl vented itself in repeated fits of hysterical laughing and crying at the time, and in the bitterest self-accusation afterwards, when she seemed fully to realize what she had done, and could those gentlemen have known the effect that disgraces was to have upon her future destiny, doubtless they would have preferred to have lost ten times the amount rather than have exposed her. Be that as it may however, the fact that she did purloin these articles is certain, and I have it in express charge from her nearest kindred, her kind brother and sister, not to attempt to conceal it, but in every thing as far as I can discover the truth to make it mani-

fest. They knew of this delinquency in their sister by her own confession; she did not attempt to deceive them, and they knew of no other instance of the kind of her offending; they know by the same means, viz. her own confessions, of her intercourse with Avery, and they know of no other person with whom they believe her to have been criminal. But to go back to the story.\*

The open, candid manner in which they had behaved, themselves, and the keen distress of the offender herself, certainly induced them to hope she would not be publicly exposed, but by some means or other it was immediately communicated to town and country. For this they were not prepared, far less did they anticipate that this circumstance would be brought up in a court of justice, eleven years after, to prove that she killed herself, to be avenged on a man who had exposed her misconduct, when she had not even shewn resentment towards them.

That this was the only sin of the kind—the only instance of dishonesty that could be brought up against S. M. Cornell, must be believed by every one who ever saw the famous trial of S. M. Cornell, denominated on the title page, “Trial of E. K. Avery.” For had there been another thing of the kind known against her—a wit observed as “heaven, earth and hell were ransacked for witnesses,” it must have made its appearance. On the contrary,

\* Some of the people so violent in denouncing this poor girl, at the time, were running crazy after a new preacher then in town who, they affirmed, was one of the greatest saints living; as he had done every thing but—murder excepted. Among other things, he had been a thief, they said. Not thinking that any particular recommendation in a preacher, we had not the honor of hearing him; but we recollect remembering, at the time, the old adage, “one man may steal a horse, while another man cannot look over his shoulder.”

she was afterwards often remarked for the punctuality and exact regularity of her dealings. The writer of these pages knew a milliner with whom she had very considerable dealings at Lovell, and to whom she was often indebted, and who remarked "that she was the most punctual person in the payment of her debts she had ever known, as she seemed to have a principle of honesty about discharging a debt the very day she had promised the money, and always bore in mind the exact sum she owed."

It appears that the connexions of S. M. Cornell generally, with the exception of her mother, and her kind hearted sister, meant to make her feel the full extent of the offence she had committed. It does not in the general way require much to set rich relations against poor ones—but here was ample room for feelings of superiority over *poor*, fallen human nature. Some of her connexions shut the door in her face when she called to see them afterwards—and for the most part they manifested a very *proper detestation* of her offence, by displaying *proper resentment*. She returned to the country and resumed her employment, but the story got there before her. She had relinquished her former employment of tailoring and gone to work in a factory. Here she was now regarded with a degree of suspicion, painful in the extreme to a person of her natural pride, and she quit the place and went to another, but being dissatisfied with the employment, again resumed her sewing, and went to live with a merchant tailor in a neighboring town; she continued in her employment some months, when the story reached the family that she "*had been talked about*," which caused them to watch her with scrupulous regard. There was a young gentleman then in the neighborhood who

used to go often into the shop, and frequently sit down by her and converse, sometimes in an under tone, and sometimes he would invite her to take a walk of a pleasant evening, and she would go with him. This circumstance, as he was a young and unengaged man, and she very pretty, would probably of itself have caused no suspicion, had not the saying that she had been talked about been so often repeated. She did not board with the family who employed her, but in the family of a respectable physician on the other side of the way: and being convinced by the circumstance just related, joined to the saying that she had been "talked about," though they did not exactly know for what, that her character was not good, the wife of her employer took it upon her to dismiss her; and sending for her to come in, begun by accusing her of "imposing herself upon their society when her character was not good;" and having said all she judged necessary on that head, she formally dismissed her from their employment. During all this time the poor, persecuted girl only opposed tears to the reproaches heaped upon her. She knew that she had, by one indiscretion, by one violation of that command, "thou shalt not covet any thing that is thy neighbor's," brought reproach upon her good name; and she probably thought they knew of it, and said nothing because she could not bear to hear it named. She only asked permission to remain until next day, when the stage would pass, which was granted. "To this day," said the lady who had vented these reproaches, "to this day, my conscience reproaches me for the harshness with which I spoke to her, when memory recalls the tears she shed, and her meek, forbearing manners, and I must say, that

she had the meekest temper, and one of the mildest and sweetest dispositions I ever met with." She added, that that very night a relation of theirs who was then very ill in their house, was distressed for a watcher, they having sent half over the neighborhood for one without success; which S. M. Cornell hearing of, immediately offered to watch with her, and though they were ashamed to accept of her services, they were constrained to; and that she was so kind and attentive to the sick, that the woman after her recovery often enquired after her, saying, "she was the kindest and best person to the sick, she ever saw."

From this place it appears she went to Slatersville, Rhode-Island, and commenced working again in the factory; soon after which, a Mr. Taylor, a Methodist, commenced preaching there, and here again there was a great stir about religion. Mr. Taylor was one of their popular preachers—there was a great reformation, and S. M. Cornell, who had for some time given up the idea that she had ever possessed religion, was once more awakened; and having, by some means or other, become persuaded that immersion was the only Scripture way of baptism, felt desirous to be rebaptized. After a profession of faith and going through all the preliminaries, she was accordingly immersed; and the Methodist meeting, who profess to believe that water administered in any form, in the name of the Trinity, is baptism, and who baptize in both ways themselves, had no hesitation in rebaptizing her. However, that is of minor consequence to what followed. She continued in fellowship with them, it appears by her letters, during her stay in Slatersville, which must have been over two years; for she staid

there until the factory burnt down, and then of course had to depart in search of employment. With several others she removed to the Branch factory, a few miles off. Here she staid until the water becoming very low, there was not steady employment, when she removed to Millville, to the satinett factory. From this place, only about a mile and a half from Slatersville, it will be seen by her letters, she attended her beloved Methodist meeting at Slatersville, and appears to have felt great joy at finding herself so near there again. No person can read her letters and suppose she feigned what she wrote. Just before her leaving Smithfield, i. e. Slatersville, Mr. Rawson, her brother-in-law, went and carried her brother, who had been absent several years at New-Orleans, to visit her, and inquired of the family where she boarded, "how Maria got along?" "Very well indeed," was the reply, "and much engaged in religion," they added, "and set a very good example."

While at this place her zeal in the cause of meetings continued. It appears she was in the habit of walking down to Slatersville, on all occasions, to meetings; and that in the prayer meetings as well as those for exhortation, she usually took a part, and was called an active member. We do not know whether she was censured at this time, but this fact we do know from letters in our possession, that she was in the habit of corresponding with Methodist sisters at this time, and subsequent to it, who were highly spoken of for piety and consistence. We have some directed to this last place, and they address her as "worthy sister," and solicit an interest in her prayers.

It had been the intention of Maria (by that

name she was generally called) to return to Slatersville as soon as the new manufactory should be completed, and never to leave the people with whom she was connected there until death, but unfortunately the works did not keep pace with her impatience; she disliked the woollen factory where she worked at Millville, and one of the girls who had been a favorite companion and sister in the church persuaded her to go to Lowell, and declaring her determination to go there first, which she did not however do immediately, as Maria came to Providence to visit her friends, or more particularly to visit her dear mother; and after staying some little time in Providence and Pawtucket, received a line from her friend urging her again to go to Lowell, and naming a place on the road, where they would meet on a certain day provided she would comply. The place was in Dedham, and here they concluded to remain, but there being no methodist meeting, she became discontented, and after four weeks residence there proceeded to Dorchester. What caused all this delay in going to Lowell is not known, unless some guardian spirit intervened and delayed her progress to the place which was to consummate her destruction. During the time of her sojourn in the towns already mentioned, at several different times she received attentions from some young man, who she thought and others thought wished to marry her. Many young men make a practice it is well known of amusing themselves at the expense of young women, who are apparently without friends and natural protectors to call them to account for such baseness and compel them to act honorably. S. M. Cornell had the curse of beauty, and she was not without admirers. She

was naturally of an affectionate and confiding disposition. Her manners too, all partook of that character of fondness for which she has been so unjustly censured. She loved her mother and sisters, and her letters bespeak any thing but a depraved heart. It is an indisputable fact that an abandoned woman is without natural affection, and we see that she was the very reverse of this. Her letters she did not even know would be preserved. Little could the poor, unfortunate girl have dreamed of the use here made of them: they were only to meet the eye of her sister and her aged and bowed down mother. It seemed as though her affections sought constantly for some object upon which to repose themselves, for something to lavish that tenderness upon with which her heart was overflowing. Disappointed in her first choice—(which has been basely insinuated was her sister's husband—a tissue of falsehoods from beginning to end)—disappointed in those schemes of earthly happiness upon which her heart had once been set, she strove to forget all but her duty, and to love God alone: nevertheless, there were times when she could not help, situated as she was, desiring some respectable connexion and decent settlement in life; and it is believed that she received the attentions of several young men who professed to her honorable attachment, with the laudable object in view of obtaining such settlement. How different her fate would have been could she have been settled in life and tied to the duties of a wife and mother, we cannot now say, but the probability is she would have made a very respectable figure in society, and a much better wife than ordinary, owing to the natural docility of her disposition, her perfect habitual good nature, and forbearance

not come to Killingly as long as I staid at this factory. You must remember that your *pride must have a fall*. I am not too proud to get a living in any situation in which it pleases God to place me. Remember that you have expressed a humble hope in God, and bear the christian name; learn then to imitate the example of Him whose name you bear, and never let it be said of you that you were too proud to follow your Saviour's steps—who was meek and lowly and went about doing good—suffering the scoffs and indignation of wicked men, and finally spilled his precious blood that you might be saved.

I do not expect to find the society here that I did in Bozrahville. I have got some acquainted with Mr. A.—'s family and like them very well. I miss Mr. Dodge and his family, and some other friends I left there; shall never enjoy myself so well in any other place as I did there. No my dear sister, there is no revival of religion here, and I have no class in the Sunday school here, and it cannot be expected I can enjoy myself so well.

If you do not come to Killingly until I go to Norwich you may not come this year, and I assure you I will never come to Providence first.

I had a letter from our dear brother a few weeks since; he is in New-Orleans, and he writes that he don't know when he shall return to Connecticut. I should be pleased could we all meet once more, but I don't expect we ever shall. My dear sister, may God be your guide—and may his holy spirit refresh and comfort you, and that we may both meet in heaven is the prayer of your affectionate sister,

SALLY MARIA CORNELL.

No. 5. KILLINGLY, May 20th, 1822.

Dear Sister—I received a letter from you soon after I came to this place, in which you murmured at my coming to the factory to work; but I do not consider myself bound to go into all sorts of company because I live near them. I never kept any but good company yet, and if I get into bad it is owing to ignorance.

I have been away from home now about one year, and have found as many friends as among my own family connexions. I have learned in whatsoever situation I am in to be content, though I have not been so contented here, being far from any friend or connexion.

You wrote me you thought I had better return to Norwich as soon as possible, and that you should

No. 6. SLATERSVILLE, (Smithfield,) 1824.  
My dear brother and sister—Almost two years has elapsed since I have written a letter or hardly a line to any one, and I scarce know what to say to my dear parent—but through the goodness of Divine Providence I am alive and in a comfortable state of health. I enjoy all the necessaries of life and many of its enjoyments. I can truly say my dear mother, that the year past has been the happiest of my life. I have lived in this village almost nineteen months, and have boarded in a very respectable family. My employment has been weaving on water looms; my wages have not been very great, yet they have been enough to procure a comfortable living, with economy and prudence. I feel as though I had done with the trifling vanities of this world—I find there is no enjoyment in them and they have almost been my ruin.

While I am writing perhaps you have long since forgotten you have a daughter Maria—but stop dear mother, I am still your daughter and Lucretia's only sister. God in mercy has shown me the depravity of my own wicked heart—and has I humbly trust, called me back from whence I had wandered. Although I had professed religion, and have turned back to the beggarly elements of the world, and brought reproach upon the cause of God—and have caused Jesus to open his wounds afresh, and have put him to an open shame—and have followed him like Peter afar off—and even denied that I ever knew him. When I look back upon my past life it looks dreary, and I feel like a mourner alone on the wide world without one friend to cheer me through this gloomy vale—but when I look forward it bears another aspect. I have been made to rejoice in the

hope of the glory of God. I feel that I have an evidence within my own soul that God has forgiven me, and I have an unshaken trust in God that I would not part with for ten thousand worlds. I find there is nothing in this vain world capable of satisfying the desires of the immortal mind. But the religion of Jesus is a fountain from whence joys of the most exalted kind will for ever flow. I have enjoyed some precious seasons since I have been in this place. Though destitute of any natural friends, yet God has raised up many christian friends of different orders—all united heart and hand, bound to one home.

We have a house for worship and have preaching every Sabbath.

Sister Lucretia, by the best information I can obtain, since I saw you last you have become a wife and a mother. I want to see the dear little babe; I hope the cares of a married life has not separated your heart from God. I believe there is something in religion that is durable; it is worth seeking and worth enjoying I feel as though I could enjoy myself in this life while blest with the presence of Jesus, I have found that a form of godliness will never make me happy but I can praise God for the enjoyment of every day's Religion—it is that which will do to live by—and will prepare us for a dying hour.

May God bless you and your companion, and if I never meet you in this world, may we be prepared to spend a never ending eternity together in the bright mansions of glory. I want to see Mother and if any of you desire to see me—write and let me know and I will try to come and spend a few days with you before long—but whether I ever see

you again or not, I want you should forgive me\* and bury what is past in oblivion and I hope my future good conduct may reward you. I heard that brother James past through Providence, if he is with you give my love to him. I should like to see him but never expect to. Farewell in haste yours

MARIA S. CORNELL.†

The kind of self-accusation contained in the second paragraph of this letter is very common among enthusiastic people when making their confessions of sin. I have heard men of integrity—and young innocent girls, get up in meeting and roundly accuse themselves of crimes—the least of which, if any other had accused them of, would have been a mortal offence. Some very sensible and intelligent persons have done this in reference to the spirituality of the law of God which makes, they say, “an angry word murder, and a wanton look adultery.” (Vide Matthew v. 28.) We ought however to deprecate the custom, as it is most generally made a very bad use of.

*Observations on the foregoing Narrative.*

Upon looking over the preceding pages the author has not been able to discover any mistakes, though there are many things which may be liable to misinterpretation, and some things omitted which the limits of the book would not permit her to discuss. Of the first of these, the reflection upon spreading the report in Providence, which proved so disastrous in the after life of Miss Cornell, is not meant to be attributed to the merchants spoken of—the scandal we know was transmitted to the public through other organs. And with respect to the letter from Bristol to one of the witnesses, containing three dollars, and which is said to be the sum actually due her, dating from the time she was summoned, it is due that witness to state, that in her narration to the author of this, she did not say it was not due her, because she was totally ignorant on that head, but she expressed some surprise that they should have “left it until after Avery was taken again”—particularly as no recompense had been tendered her for her attendance at Newport where she had been “summoned by the prisoner and detained much longer.”

There is one subject upon which we wished largely to have descanted in this work, but upon which a few words must suffice: that is, the great injury and injustice which the publication of the life and character of Sarah M. Cornell, has done to that class of young women whose lot in life has compelled them to labor in a manufactory. Many have taken the liberty to say that if all those disgusting particulars

were true, it proved to demonstration that "vice was not regarded among that portion of society as it was in any other community; that there was little regard to morals among them, or that persons could not have been tolerated and associated with as we know she was—and finally that it ought to be a warning to parents not to let a daughter go to those places, which was going to certain ruin." Now nothing can be more unjust than this. There is no person who deprecates the practice of sending little children into a cotton manufactory more than the author; she avers with truth that she has often been affected to tears at the sight of the little innocents, compelled to leave their beds before the rising of the sun and labor until long after its going down in those establishments, and that perhaps to support some idle, drunken father, or miserable, unfeeling mother; but when she has again seen healthy, sprightly and well educated girls, laboring to assist some widowed mother, or to give education to some half dozen little brothers and sisters, her feelings have received a different impulse. There is no way that grown up girls in the present state of society can get better wages—not where their payment is so sure. And the privilege of working in manufactories to such is a great one. That these girls are careless of their conduct or their company is scarce ever the case—and the author has known numbers despised and shunned, and hunted from the manufacturing villages, upon a charge of a much less serious nature than any of those brought against S. M. Cornell, that is, where they had no meeting to shelter them—where backslidings and recoveries, expulsion and reinstatement, were a common thing. In such a case perhaps it might not be known out of the

meeting. Why, if it were publicly known, as it ought to be, a girl guilty of half the offences she is charged with, in the state of Massachusetts or Connecticut, would at once find herself in the House of Correction.