

Cotton Mill Work and Night School Studies

‘David, it’s time to wake up and get ready for work.’

Ten-year-old David Livingstone heard his mother’s quiet voice and felt her gently shaking his shoulder to help awaken him. Opening his eyes, he saw her smiling down. His brother John, two years older than he, was already sitting up, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

‘Alright, Mother,’ David said as he slowly sat up. He felt tired after doing school homework till late the previous evening and not getting a full night of rest. But he knew he needed to get up right away, in order to be at the cotton factory where John and he worked by 6 a.m.

‘Shhhhh!’ Agnes Livingstone reminded her two oldest sons in a whisper as they got up. ‘Don’t wake the wee ones. They’re still sleeping.’ David glanced over at his three younger siblings – Janet and Charles, ages five and two, and Agnes the baby.

The Livingstone family lived in a tiny one-room apartment that was only fourteen feet long and ten feet wide. A small wood-burning cook stove, which also

provided heat for the apartment, was nestled under a mantel at one end of the room. The only furnishings in the room were a smallish table, a few wooden chairs of different sizes, and a chest of drawers. The apartment also had two little side nooks, each with a bed, where family members slept. Some of the children also slept on the floor. This had been David's only home from birth.

'Good morning, lads,' David and John's father, Neil Livingstone, greeted them pleasantly as they started getting dressed.

'Good morning, Father,' they responded.

As was the case many early mornings, Mr Livingstone was sitting at the table reading his Bible by the light of a candle and enjoying a hot cup of tea. Another candle glowed on the mantel above the stove.

Neil Livingstone was a traveling tea salesman. People appreciated his honesty, kindness and friendliness. While selling tea Mr Livingstone also passed out Gospel tracts, which told people about the Good News of salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

Mr Livingstone was a dedicated Christian and worked hard at his business. However, he had a difficult time earning enough money to provide food, clothes, housing, and the other material needs of his family. That is why the Livingstones lived in such a tiny apartment with so few possessions. That is also why David and John, though only ten and twelve years old, needed to work in the local cotton factory to help provide money for their family.

Many families in Scotland and other parts of Britain during the 1820s were poor like the Livingstones. Back then there were few good-paying jobs available, so many people had to work long hours for a small amount of pay. In those days most boys received only a grammar school education and were expected, beginning at quite a young age, to get a job and learn a trade to help support their family.

Twenty-four families lived in the three-story brick tenement building where the Livingstones resided. Each family had only a small apartment like the Livingstones' with no indoor plumbing, so families had to carry water to their homes in a bucket. Bathing and toilet facilities, which were shared with the other families, were located near the tenement building.

Before David and John left their home that morning, Mrs Livingstone gave them a quick inspection, as she did nearly every day. 'My goodness, David,' she said when she saw that his coat sleeves did not reach to his wrists, 'you're growing so quickly you'll soon be too big for this jacket.' She used her fingers to brush aside an unruly strand of dark brown hair that fell across David's forehead above his hazel-colored eyes. 'And what are we going to do about this shaggy hair of yours? You're past due for a haircut.'

David smiled up at his mother but quickly ducked away from her grooming hands. She always worked so hard, caring for her family and keeping their small home neat and tidy. There never seemed to be any end to all

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the work she needed to do – cleaning and sweeping the house, cooking and baking food, washing dishes and laundry, as well as sewing and mending clothes.

Mrs Livingstone loved, encouraged and supported her husband and children. She promoted a positive, peaceful and cheery spirit in their home. She never complained about her heavy workload or the fact that their family had so little money or other possessions. But she could not always hide the worries she sometimes had because of their constant short supply of money.

It was only a short walk from the tenement building to the large cotton mill in their small town of Blantyre, Scotland, population 2,000 and just eight miles from the large city of Glasgow. The Blantyre cotton mill was a long, tall rectangular building that overlooked the banks of the River Clyde. The mill was built of bricks and had been painted white. Scores of large windows, stacked five stories high, lined its sides.

Inside the mill, rows of large cotton-spinning machines filled the factory's big open rooms. Those machines spun the cotton into yarn or thread. The factory was terribly noisy when the machines, with their many moving parts, were running and people were shouting above the sound of the machinery. The inside of the mill was also very hot. The factory was steam-heated to between eighty and ninety degrees Fahrenheit because hot, moist conditions were needed to make good quality thread.

David worked as a piecer at the mill. His job was to piece together threads on the spinning frames that were fraying or had broken. With as many as 100 lines of thread being used on a single spinning machine, he had many threads to watch carefully. In addition to needing sharp eyes, he also had to be agile because much of his work was done while balancing over the machine or crawling under its many lines of thread.

Several hundred people worked at the cotton mill. More than one-quarter of that number were teenagers or children as young as nine years of age. Even young children like David often worked twelve hours a day and around seventy hours per week! Mill employees commonly worked from 6 a.m. till 8 p.m., six days a week. David was always glad when it was time for their half-hour breakfast break and their hour-long lunch break.

The company that owned the mill also operated an evening school for its youth employees. The school met from 8 to 10 p.m. When David's long, tiring workday was finished, he went straight to school for two hours rather than going home to rest. Many young people who worked at the factory did not have the interest or energy to attend school after their wearisome workdays.

However, David loved learning and had a strong desire to get a good education. During his younger years he had learned 'the three R's' (reading, writing and arithmetic) in a small school that met in a lower room of the tenement building where his family lived.

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Now that he had started working, he was determined to continue his education. His parents encouraged and supported him in doing so.

The year before, when he was nine years old, David had shown his sharp mind and diligent spirit in a Bible memory challenge from his Sunday School teacher at the Old Parish Church in Blantyre. David memorized all 176 verses of Psalm 119, which is the longest chapter in the Bible. He recited the entire psalm to his teacher with only five errors. As a reward for his outstanding accomplishment, he received a New Testament.

One of the subjects that David started studying during his first year at the evening school was Latin. 'If you want a good education,' his teacher William McSkimming told him kindly, 'then you must study Latin. Latin is the language of great men of learning.' David continued to study Latin with Mr McSkimming's help for several years. He learned it well and was able to read the writings of famous ancient Roman poets like Virgil and Horace.

David always clearly remembered the night when he returned home with his wages from his first long week of work at the mill. After entering their family apartment, he excitedly crossed the room to where his mother was sitting. He proudly placed the very first half-crown piece that he had earned in her lap. It was worth two shillings and six pence or one-eighth of a pound. 'Here, Mother,' he stated, 'now you won't need to worry so much about needing money.' When her

eyes clouded with tears, he added: 'Don't cry, Mother. I want you to be happy.'

'I am happy, David,' she said as a smile came to her lips. 'These are tears of joy. I'm so thankful for you and John helping us out like this, and rightly proud of both of you.'

'I'm proud of you boys also,' David's father added. Then, knowing his son had received a few pence more than half a crown for his first week's wages, Mr Livingstone asked: 'What are you going to do with the rest of your earnings?'

'I'm going to buy a copy of Ruddiman's *Rudiments of Latin*,' David answered definitely. That was a grammar book that would help him learn Latin. He did indeed buy that book and wore it out using it. In the years that followed he continued to give most of his earnings from work to help provide money for his family.

When David arrived home after his shift at the mill and two hours of night school, he still needed to do his school homework. Even though he was tired, he pushed himself to complete it. As he grew older and his homework became more difficult, he often studied till midnight or later. Sometimes his mother got out of bed and took his books from his hands, stating: 'You must go to bed now, son.'

'But, Mother ...,' he would begin to protest.

'No buts,' she would say firmly. 'You have to be back at the mill by six o'clock in the morning. You're not going to get enough rest as it is.'

David loved to read. Books about science and people's travels were his favorites. He had no interest in reading novels. And much to his father's disappointment and concern, he showed little interest in the Christian books that Mr Livingstone encouraged him to read.

David came up with a way to get some reading done while at work. He set up a book on part of the cotton spinning machine where it would not be in the way or cause a problem. Then as he passed back and forth doing his work as a piecer, he read sentence after sentence. Some days he was able to get quite a bit of reading done in that way.

Some of the other piecers who did not share David's interest in learning would pester him by throwing empty bobbins (spools that had held thread or yarn) to knock his book off the machine. They did not hesitate to suggest ways they thought he should use his time other than in reading and studying so much. Often, they started their suggestions with the words, 'I think ...':

'I think you should get your nose out of your books and have more fun,' one would advise.

'Yeah, Davey,' another would join in. 'I think you should hang around with us after work rather than running off to old McSkimming's school.'

'I think,' a third boy would add, 'you should forget about learning things like Latin and arithmetic. Those'll never do you any good anyway.'

When David grew tired of their suggestions he would sometimes respond with a playful grin: 'You

think! I can *think* and *act* for myself; don't need anybody to think for me, I assure you.'

Though David's free time was very limited, he did not spend all his time working or studying. Nor did he always have his nose in a book. His scientific interests led him to go exploring for new types of plants or rocks. Through the years he and his two brothers often explored the surrounding countryside. They would gather different kinds of plants and herbs, then bring them home to identify them with the help of a couple of botany books.

On one of their outings, the Livingstone brothers went down into a limestone quarry. David was amazed and delighted as he discovered shell fossils in the rocks. 'How ever did these shells come into these rocks?' he asked a quarry worker.

The man shrugged his shoulders and offered a simple explanation: 'When God made the rocks, He made the shells in them.' David was not convinced that answer was correct.