

from *The Clock*

by James Lincoln Collier and Christopher Collier

*James Lincoln Collier and Christopher Collier are brothers who have written a number of historical novels for young people. In *The Clock*, they tell the story of Annie Steele. Annie wants to be a teacher. But her father has run up too many debts, so he makes her go to work in a mill that makes wool cloth. There, Annie experiences one of the effects of industrialization: life is scheduled by the clock, not by the sun.*

On Monday I started to work at the mill. There were eight of us girls, and we were put up on the second story in a room of our own to keep us from distracting the boys. I was glad about that in one way, for it made me blush when the boys winked at me like that; but in another way I was disappointed, for I was mighty curious about those New York boys,¹ and wanted to hear their stories and find out what New York was like.

But still, it was nice to be with some girls. I knew most of them from church, anyway, although not as well as I knew Hetty Brown. Hetty's ma was an old friend of my ma, going way back to when Ma first came to Humphreysville with Pa. Naturally, we visited back and forth with them, especially during the winter, at times when things on the farm were slow. Hetty was short and plump, and always looked on the bright side of things. If you told Hetty you weren't feeling good, she'd say it was probably something you ate and you'd feel better soon; and if you said it looked like rain, she'd say it wouldn't last long. Hetty was cheerful to be around.

All the girls worked on slubbing billies. A slubbing billy was really a machine for spinning. But instead of having one little spindle for twisting the wool into yarn, it had eight big ones. It looked like a table without a top—just a frame on legs. The spindles were at one end, about three feet from the other end. The yarn stretched from one end to the other. At the opposite end from the spindles there were two girls, each with a big basket of rolags.² We worked just like I did at home in the parlor at the spinning wheel, picking up the rolls of wool, twisting them between our thumb and fingers onto the end of the spinning yarn. You had to watch out for the same things as home—bunching, or stretching too much so the connection broke. Only we didn't march back and forth by the walking wheel; we just stood in one place all day; and that was much more tiresome than all that walking.

There were some other differences too. First off, the noise. You could hear the great wheel creaking as it turned in the water outside, below the slubbing-room window. And you heard the main axle that came from the waterwheel into the mill, turning its gears and making all the belts turn that then turned the axles that went to each machine. And then every machine made its own whirring, or clanking, or banging, or humming. You had to speak up real loud to be heard.

1. **New York boys:** Many of the workers at the mill were orphan boys brought from New York City.
2. **rolags:** curly rolls of wool fibers.