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De-Brutalizing Labor

Our Town lives by its factories and mills. We make a great variety of things - structural steel, and very proud, indeed, we are of it for we take the ore fresh from the mines and put it through all its paces up to the time it comes out the skeleton of a car, a bridge, a sky-scraper. But we do other things, too, even bottle pickles and knit stockings!

For many, many years these have been our tasks. There are men and women in Our Town who can remember long before such a thing as steel was known in these United States, when our only iron works were little forges where horse shoes, nails and now and then a pair of andirons were hammered out, and when all the pickles and stockings we had were those that the women bottled and knit. That is, you see, we have a history, we have traditions, we have veterans. Why, down in our steel mill there are a couple of men who worked under that greatest leader of steel men, Captain Billy Jones - worked under him from the day that in 1855 he took charge of Andrew Carnegie's venture in steel making at Braddock, Pa. These men will tell you that it was Captain Jones that made the Carnegie fortune. They labored and struggled under him until the day they saw him burned to death in a flood of molten metal.

That is, we have great traditions of men and their struggles, and we are so close to it all and have been for so many years that we have scant patience with those who come in from outside - who never having lived with mills and factories cannot, so we believe, possibly love and understand them. They go away to tell the

world what intolerable places they are. We never have liked that, ~~and~~ though it is true we have had to admit that there are many things about us that <sup>are</sup> were quite as terrible as the outsider declared - perhaps even more terrible - things they not knowing the insides of us thoroughly cannot possibly see any more than they can thoroughly understand what they do see. We have had to admit that it took an enormous amount of sheer brute labor to do our work, ~~heavy labor~~, lifting beyond strength, shoveling materials that filled lungs and head with deadly dust, working in fumes that paralyzed, stoking in heat that sent <sup>men</sup> ~~them~~ staggering to the air, felled them in faints. ~~Oh,~~ we have known all of that and it has turned us sick at heart that the great industries by which Our Town lived should demand this awful toll of human beings.

It is because we have felt this so deeply, - though we have resented outsiders talking about it - that we are so exultant over a change that is coming in our works. It has been coming so long and so gradually that we have hardly realized it, and we have not noticed that our critics generally have seen it, or, if they have they have so disliked to modify their stories that they have kept quiet about it. The truth is that the working places in Our Town are busy de-brutalizing themselves.

The other day they asked us down to see a new plant started. We had heard about it - they called it a mechanical plant, but that meant nothing until we saw it. And ~~then~~ <sup>we</sup> saw it meant transformation, revolution, for here there was no man shoveling, lifting, wheeling, stoking beyond his strength. There

were tremendous boilers and furnaces in the new plant. They use thousands of tons of coal a week but from the time that coal leaves the yard in the cars it is not touched by men's hands. Machines controlled by men unload and powder it and blow it into the furnaces. You can walk in front of those roaring fires today in a temperature which never wavers the year round - equable, pleasant, perfectly controlled. They have taken away the little hospital in the yard to which they used to carry a half dozen men a day - strong men, prostrated by heat!

Do you wonder that we want to talk about that in Our Town - that we want the outsider to know it? We told this to one outsider who looked horrified instead of glad. "Don't you see what they are doing? <sup>he said,</sup> ~~this~~ displacing labor, taking the bread from men's mouths - it is but another move of capital to impoverish the working man!"

They certainly have displaced labor. I should say where there had been twenty-five men in the old days there is one now. I talked with the superintendent. "Had it not occurred to you," he said contemptuously, "that it took men to make these machines that we are using - trained men, inventors, pattern makers - that it took skilled steel workers to produce them, that it takes at least <sup>semi-</sup> ~~some~~ skilled men to run them. ~~Don't you see that~~ instead of fewer men employed this plant means if you follow it through to its origin more men of higher grade employed? Why, if you you who live in this town knew as much about these mills as you

ought to, you would know that we are halving our unskilled labor and doubling our semiskilled and skilled.

"Perhaps we did have to do it, I guess we did. The truth is men are pushing up in this country, we cannot get enough of them to do work in the old way and we have to adapt our industries to men's ambitions. They want something that pulls on their minds rather than their muscles. It is brains that is making steel now, not brawn."

I talked to others about it. There was a smelter. "Yes, it is true," he said. Down in Arizona we have built a mechanical plant that with 240 men is doing the work which in our old time plants required 1400. We had to do it, we could not get unskilled men enough. What I had seen and what I was hearing made me think about something I saw two or three years ago in Southern Idaho, in the centre of thousands of acres of redeemed sage brush land, — a great electric plant through which the impounded waters of the Snake River dam were distributed to farms as they were needed. And one woman, one lone woman, was running the whole thing - in the absence of her husband who was the official engineer. Her eye on the dials, her quick hand on the levers turned waters on and off through all the big territory as the telephone told her they were required. There were hardly enough men in Idaho twenty years ago to have done that work as efficiently as that plant, run by one woman, was doing it at that moment.

As we talked it over we agreed that it explained many things in Our Town. It explained something that the women had

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been noting - that there were many more eligible young men in town for our girls who had been to business schools or college and went back and forth from the city every day. They were mill men and yet they were college men, engineers, chemists, trained men. We had not asked how it could be that the type of the men in the mills had so changed, we were only thankful that it was so. And it explains something else - the pressure that the boys of the town <sup>are</sup> ~~were~~ making for books to read, technical schools to go to. They <sup>are</sup> ~~were~~ seeing what we had not realized, that they must know more than their fathers did if they <sup>are</sup> ~~were~~ to make good in the steel mill. They must know something of mechanics, of electricity, of mathematics.

So we are glad in Our Town. It is a long step, so we feel, away from those things that have tormented us, though we took good care not to let the investigating outsider see our trouble. We have thought it could not be helped. Shoveling coal, for instance, has always seemed to us one of the ugly, unescapable facts of the universe. It had to be done, always would have to be done, somebody must do it, and somehow we felt as if God in His eternal wisdom had created a class fit only to do that; that is, we argued as the old slave holder did, that the negro was created for the express purpose of working in cotton and sugar cane fields and that to free him was to fly in the face of his Creator.

Of course we never put it baldly like that, but we explained to ourselves the ugly facts we did not like in some such way. And now we find that the greatest of steel and iron men are

telling us that they cannot afford men to shovel coal.

Well, if it can be done away with here, can it not be done away with in other places? Will it not have to be done away with everywhere in time? It certainly has come to be true in Our Town that we cannot afford to use men in brutal tasks, that we are de-brutalizing our labor.