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A Blind Hog's Acorns

*Vignettes of the
Maladies of Workers*

by

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hold back deadly rays from the sun. If they ever get through, exit Josie; exit Doctor. Throughout the world there have been sun worshipers, moon worshipers, fire worshipers, grain worshipers. Only because man's friend 'dust' in its most helpful forms is invisible has the world escaped a dust-worshipping cult."

Josie in turn — a little uncertain that she wasn't being ribbed — gasped, "Doctor, if all you says is true, I ain't ever goin' to disturb dust no more."

That pedantry boomeranged. Now that dust is sacred, I have more dust. Notwithstanding, up to this point I have been friendly to dusts. Most dusts are friendly, but have few friends.

But dust is also a foe — some dust. Most bad dusts are merely pestiferous, some are temporarily discomfiting, a few are mortal enemies. My one time small daughter in tribute to the odors of hollyhocks was wont to stick her not too aquiline nose into the flower cup. The enemy in the form of pollen dust immediately set about the business of temporarily producing a bulbous nose that might compete with any of the rhinosclerotic noses of the back alley besodden.

Of the first-flight dust foes — there are not so many — lead, mercury, arsenic, manganese, fluorides, etc., silica is the archfiend. Among occupational diseases, silicosis (the lung disease produced by fine silica) is the grave-digger. The history of labor is pockmarked with records of silicosis under some name such as "potter's rot," "miner's asthma," "stone hewer's phthisis," "dust consumption."

Tragedy from silicosis at Gauley Bridge, West Virginia, a catastrophe within the time even of those now in high schools, is the real but little recognized national disgrace from which stems much of the current feverish surge of industrial worker protection. In the midst of a hurried-up hydroelectric tunnelling operation men died by the hundreds. All were grossly exposed to silica dust with but the semblance of protection. That is not my story. I cannot record the sorry details.

Some fifteen thousand other workers in dusty trades in twenty-two

states have passed through the mills of medical examination within my charge — dust counts, chemical analyses, x-rays of chests, x-rays of dusts, disability ratings, autopsies, incineration of lung samples. Some have proved hale and hearty, just frightened, others mildly afflicted with dusty lung disease; fair numbers were grievously disabled, a few shortly died. These workers derived from scores of industries — foundries, potteries, mines, quarries, glass mills, natural stone grinding operations, sand blasting, soap factories — on and on.

Fifteen thousand workers in dusty trades have furnished fifteen thousand stories packed with drama, tragedy, fear, hysteria — and few with lying. A single one, shorn of all medical technicalities, is reassembled for sharing with those who elect an acquaintance with “silicosis.”

MARTIN FORT is dead now and cannot speak for himself. I speak for him, using at times his own words:

“I am fifty years old now. For thirty-one years I have been a millstone sharpener. These stones are two kinds; both grind grain. They are granite, but we call them ‘burr’ (buhr) stones. That’s what my dad called them. He worked here before me. He taught me this work. He was killed twenty years ago. A stone fell over on him. That was before we had cranes. I must have trimmed over twenty thousand stones, me and some other fellas; mostly the same wheels over and over. There are hundreds of them in the mill. When they get too thin, we throw them away. They are hauled out to the dump. In about four months’ time they won’t cut the grain right. Then they come in where I work. We rough ‘em up first, then fine tool ‘em. Years ago all the work was hand; now we have power tools.”

“That’s fine about the job, Martin,” I encouraged, “but how about the dust?”

“Plenty of grit and chips all the time but not much dust. No clouds of dust ‘cept when we blowed off the wheel.” That fits into the picture, for the dust that causes silicosis is so fine that it cannot be seen with the naked eye.