

## [Description of Mill Village]

### DESCRIPTION OF MILL VILLAGE

On the Asheville side of the French Broad River at the point where a bridge connects West Asheville with Asheville proper, a level strip of land runs southward for about two hundred yards to form a valley-floor which is bounded on one side by the river and on the other by a network of railroad tracks. Situated on part of this land is a big grey brick building which houses the Asheville Cotton Mill. Four hundred people work there and about half of them live on Factory Hill.

The approach to Factory Hill from the West Asheville road is over a brick-paved street on whose sides are dingy, smoke-blackened houses. Factory Hill itself is broken into three sections by intervening houses not belonging to the mill company. There is no distinct beginning or ending; to any of the sections and it is only by inquiry that one is able in some instances to determine which are mill houses.

A steep flight of steps leads from the brick-paved street to a rough road on whose edges four houses are located. This is the beginning of the first section of Factory Hill. On up the hill twenty houses squat crookedly against the earth and find their connection one with another by uneven pathways upon which cinders have been dumped in a fight against mud. Four or five inhabitants in this part of Factory Hill have planted a little shrubbery on the narrow soil-patches around their doors.

The road leading into the second section of mill houses which is Factory Hill proper, is nothing more than a crooked slit of earth on which the company did not build houses. Cars climb down over its ravined surface with a tortoise-like effort and chug their way into the street below. Now and then some young boy ventures forth with a four-wheeled contraption on which he bumps his way from one gully's edge to another.

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The houses were not built to follow the course of the road. Some of them border on it but more diverge from it and stand crookedly on little spots of barren ground. They range in size from three rooms of diminutive proportions to six and eight rooms which serve as two and three family homes. Their painted surface is so blackened by accumulated train smoke that it is necessary to look twice to see which were originally yellow and which were grey. No house has a yard but there on the lower end of the Hill one brave man had dug a flower bed on his few feet of earth in which a bunch of phlox and three marigolds are growing. Others have planted scattered hills of sunflowers. Old buckets and tin cans containing pot flowers line the doorsteps of a number of houses. One looks in vain for even a tiny tree.

Here and there alongside a dingy house an old automobile, braced by a rock, is parked. Not long ago one inhabitant made plans with his neighbors by which they were to pool their limited space and grade it down so that they might build a partitioned shed in which to keep their cars and protect them partially from the weather. The superintendent would not give his permission, however, because he thought such a building might ruin the appearance of the village.

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Big black cans in which dye was shipped to the mill, now used as garbage cans, without covers, are scattered on level spots and form a part of the landscape seen from most of the front porches. The garbage is removed by the company at uncertain intervals.

The road which leads into the village crawls on up the hillside and stops abruptly in front of a one-time dwelling which is now used as a clubhouse. The first floor of the building has been converted into a meeting place for the Girls Club. The Girls Club was organized by the Buncombe County Community Schools and is now directed by a WPA teacher. Meetings are held weekly during the school months of the year. About forty girls between the ages sixteen and twenty meet for games, instruction, and refreshments. Instruction consists chiefly of lessons in table manners and table arrangement. Through the efforts

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of a former leader the club has been equipped with dishes, a stove, piano, tables, chairs, cooking stove, and a radio. Holiday parties are given on occasion and each girl may invite her boy friend. Games are played and refreshments, donated by some interested person, are served. The Club serves as the only form of recreation for the majority of its members.

Upstairs in the same building the company has installed a bathtub and a shower. Every person in the mill village has the privilege of keeping clean by bathing once a week in this bathroom. Little girls may have their baths on Friday afternoon from one o'clock to four. On Friday evening from seven to nine the men may bathe. The hours between one-thirty and four on 4 Saturdays are allotted to the small boys and the hours from four-thirty to seven to the women. The company pays a man six dollars a month to keep the building and build the fires to heat the water for bathing. Several persons who once enjoyed the privilege of a bath in a bathtub have quit going because they contracted athlete's foot and they are now afraid of contracting other diseases if they continue to share an ill-kept bathroom with numbers of other people.

The weekly bath is the one outside activity provided for by the mill. It is up to each person to create his own recreational devices in a village where there are no space and no facilities. Young boys, not yet eighteen, with no money, no job, and no particular interest in anything wander aimlessly from neighbor's house to neighbor's house to talk with boys whose opportunities for recreation are no better than their own. Sometimes they join older boys in drinking sprees which occasionally end in fights and bandaged heads. Infrequently they go on fishing trips to Sandy Bottoms, each taking an old quilt or blanket on which to sleep. Sometimes they loaf at the cafe or one of the filling stations located on the street below.

On the west side of the paved street below Factory Hill proper is located a string of ten or eleven houses which make the third section of the mill village. In the musty, three-walled basement of one of these houses a recreational feature for children is conducted by Dick Jones. Dick, the ten year old boy who lives with his family in the dingy upstairs, has 5

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hung curtains made of old sacks and torn sheets across the street side of the basement, and there he sometimes gives shows when his father's old truck is not parked inside. From behind the flapping edges of the make-shift curtain he peers at passers-by and extends an invitation to any grown-up who greets him with a smile. Already he will have gathered fifteen or twenty of the neighborhood children and have them seated on old tin buckets, small tubs, and stone blocks. The row of seats in front has been sold out for four matches per seat. The unreserved ones behind bring only two matches.

Dick's current number is a two-man performance of Snow White. Dick has never seen the picture but he keeps up with the story in the funny paper, and he saw the play given at school the past year. Only one child out of his regular audience saw the picture while it was showing in Asheville and she would never think of correcting Dick if he fails to keep strictly to the story. With one assistant and limited equipment Dick cannot be exactly accurate and she knows it.

Dick's show is staged / after this fashion: A little old wagon is drawn up front and placed at some distance from the eager audience. Dick and his assistant run outside. In a minute Dick reenters, wearing over his devilish little face a Snow White mask. With a mincing step he walks to the wagon, stretches himself and says in a highly pitched voice "Oh, I feel very lonely. I wish someone would come." And in walks the eleven year old pasty-faced assistant carrying in his hand three tiny green apples plucked from a tree up the street.

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"Won't you have a apple?" he says to Snow White in a crackly, witch's voice.

Snow White bites into the proffered apple and says that it's good. The witch hands her another. When she puts her lips to the second one she falls over into a deep sleep. In great glee the witch says "I reckon that fixes you," and departs. Little Snow White, tired of waiting for the next episode, grunts once and the audience yells "Keep still, you're dead."

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Presently the assistant transformed now into Prince Charming by the addition of a pepper weed "plume" to his old felt hat walks briskly in, embraces Snow White and exclaims "At last I've found you." And in this manner Dick's version of Snow White ends.

Dick has in his cast two girls who tap dance but sometimes when visitors are present they suffer from stage fright and refuse to perform until properly reprimanded. Dick's method of reasoning with them is something like this. "Supposen folks in real shows done like that, what do you reckon would happen?" After that the tapping begins.

The last number on Dick's program is the presentation of a smoking dummy. He has acquired from a drug store a paste board Phillip Morris and he has punched a hole in Phillip's mouth. In t is opening Dick places a cigarette and while his assistant holds the match Dick puffs at the cigarette until it's lighted. The children laugh in glee as the dummy continues to smoke, unaided.

After the show is over the children talk a little among themselves, 7 play around in the dirty basement, and then go up the hill to their dingy homes.