# First-Rate Man

# A 10-minute play

by

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# Characters and Cast:

(Major roles are in boldface.)

**Frederick Taylor**

Narrator/21st Century Industrialist/**Mary Johnson**

Staffer 1 at Boxwood, Dupont Man/**Rep. William Wilson**

Staffer 2 at Boxwood, Dupont Man/Wilson’s Aide/Simonds Rolling Machine Company Executive

Based on *The One Best Way: Frederick Winslow Taylor and the Enigma of Efficiency,* by Robert Kanigel. New York, Viking, 1997. This is the standard biography of Frederick W. Taylor.

# Scene 1

(Lights. There is a row of seats facing upstage suggesting many more rows. The NARRATOR enters.)

NARRATOR: It is 1911. Frederick M. Taylor’s gospel of scientific management has swept the nation. Not only America’s businesses, but America’s hospitals, schools, government agencies, and more, have embraced Taylor’s ideas about efficiency and measurement. Leaving aside baseball, Hollywood, and politics, Taylor is probably the most famous man in the nation. Basking in the adulation, he regularly hosts audiences of business leaders at his estate, Boxwood, outside of Philadelphia.

(NARRATOR exits. STAFFER 1 and STAFFER 2 enter.)

STAFFER 1: There are two empty seats in the third row. Mr. Taylor will not like this. (Looking at a sheet of paper.) It’s the men from Dupont.

STAFFER 2: A limo is coming up the drive. It must be Dupont. Shall we ask Mr. Taylor to wait a few minutes for the Dupont men to take their seats?

STAFFER 1: No. Mr. Taylor never delays—not even a single second.

(The STAFFERS exit. After a moment, TAYLOR enters to applause, steps up to a small platform, and, facing the Boxwood and the theater audience, begins to speak.)

TAYLOR: Welcome, gentlemen, to my “modest home”—Boxwood. As you all know, I am retired from business. I accept no more paid consulting contracts. In order to keep pace with the changes in American industry, and to test new ideas, I take on a limited number of consulting projects, but always without renumeration. The sole purpose of my professional life and the reason I host these “Boxwood Talks,” as they’ve come to be known, is the betterment of American industry, the American worker, and ultimately Humankind. After my brief remarks, I will gladly speak personally with any of you during the dinner reception. Because the weather is so favorable, we are hosting the reception today in the garden.

(TAYLOR speaks in pantomime as the two STAFFERS re-enter.)

STAFFER 2: The men from Dupont are here.

STAFFER 1: I will show them to their seats. They’ve only missed the first few minutes.

(STAFFER 1 and STAFFER 2 withdraw to the periphery and, as actors, put on dark jackets. They are now DUPONT MAN 1 and DUPONT MAN 2. In the manner of corporate executives, they glance back from where they entered to suggest that they are being seated by STAFFER 1. Then they take two of the vacant seats.)

TAYLOR: When I joined Bethlehem Steel, there was only one kind of shovel for the many thousands of men who spend their workdays shoveling. No one had ever considered the *science* of shoveling. But, with my assistants, I analyzed every one of the constituent motions that comprise shoveling—which muscles are used, and in what sequence. We took into account the pile from which the material is taken and where the material is deposited. We determined the amount of energy expended and the resulting fatigue on each muscle group. We made separate calculations for different body types—men, as you know, differ significantly in height, weight, arm length, and, of course, strength and endurance.

As a result of this research, I designed 15 different shovels and carefully organized the work of the shovelers at Bethlehem Steel. Today, as each man clocks in for his shift, he is issued a ticket indicating the kind of material he is to shovel that day. He then reports to the shovel room and is issued the appropriate shovel for that material. If a man is shoveling iron scrap, the shovel scoop must be relatively small and the length of the shaft, relative to his size, is shorter. If the man is shoveling coal, which is less dense than iron, the scoop can be larger and the shaft is longer. If he is shoveling fly ash, the scoop can be considerably larger. And, of course, we considered the shoveling speed we can expect from a first-rate man for each kind of material.

“Extra expense,” you are thinking. “Extra complexity.” But the output of the shovelers at Bethlehem Steel increased 47% due to the application of scientific management, easily paying for the extra expense involved. And how do we know output increased by 47%? Because we recorded, and continue to record, the output of each man, on a random basis, one day each week. With scientific management, no man—or woman--works beyond his physical ability—but no man works less.

Those who fall below the expected level of output are retrained in the skill of shoveling. I often did this retraining myself. If retraining does not succeed, these shovelers are replaced with better men. Over time, the quality of the shovelers at Bethlehem Steel has improved greatly, and I say with pride that this part of our workforce consists essentially of first-rate shovelers. As scientific management is systematically applied to all jobs, including clerical jobs, in this large and complex corporation, we are rapidly moving toward the level of productivity achievable only by having first-rate workers in every job category.

My wife and I were raised in Quaker families, and the abuse of workingmen through mandatory over-exertion, so common in today’s factories, is a moral affront to us. Under scientific management workers perform only to the maximum level of their ability—which is what they expect to do and *want* to do—especially because they share in the increased productivity with incentive pay.

Let me provide one more example. All across this nation, the (With a touch of humor.) “disciples” of scientific management are shortening the work day. Instead of the standard 12-hour shift with one hour for lunch, we now schedule a 15-minute cessation from labor, a “work break,” if you will, at 10:00 and at 2:00—be it factory or office. In factories, the men wipe their brows and drink cool water. In offices, coffee or tea is often provided. To compensate for these two new periods of rest, the lunch period is reduced from one hour to 45 minutes. One hour was always inefficient. Ninety percent of workers finished their meals in less than 33 minutes, and often used the extra time to get into mischief.

I know you are asking yourself this question: How can my business compete if we are to give employees two 15-minutes of rest while only shortening the lunch period by 15 minutes? How do we justify paying for an extra 15 minutes of idleness? The answer is that productivity—measured in a multiple ways—increases very significantly.

Efficiency and measurement. Efficiency and measurement. Science applied to the human being at work. These two examples: shoveling as a science, and the benefits of scheduled breaks illustrate the pathway to the industrial Utopia that lies directly in our future. Men will produce more. Greater production means . . .

(TAYLOR freezes. The 21st CENTURY INDUSTRIALIST, formerly the NARRATOR, now in modern dress, enters, talking on a cell phone.)

21st CENTURY INDUSTRIALIST: That’s right Mr. Hong. We will be paying you 3% less per unit, with the usual discounts and contingencies. . . You will *have* to find a way. Surely greater efficiencies can be achieved, even in the hand assembly. Better training. Better workers—more skilled, more *motivated*. You’ll find a way to handle the documentation. But—and I emphasize this—there can be no reduction in quality. Testing must remain rigorous—very rigorous. Environmental considerations are your business. Do we understand each other, Mr. Hong?

(TAYLOR unfreezes and resumes.)

TAYLOR: Greater production means that manufactured goods will sell at lower prices, enabling workers to achieve a higher standard of living. Labor strife will cease. Employees will love their employers. Employers will care for their employees. This is the promise of scientific management, and this promise is rapidly being fulfilled.

Numerous consulting firms now practice the new engineering discipline I have named “industrial engineering.” The heart of this practice is scientific management. Most of these firms are headed by one of my close disciples. I implore you: Hire one of these firms to teach you how to implement scientific management. Or, as an alternative, read and closely follow one of my books. Help me bring about what we all desire: industrial Utopia. Thank you for your time and attention. I can take a few question now. Then we will re-convene in the garden for a meal prepared by the Boxwood staff under the supervision of my dear wife, Lou Spooner Taylor.

(Applause from the audience.)

TAYLOR: Thank you! Thank you!

(Blackout.)

# Scene 2

(Lights.)

(TAYLOR is seated at a workplace table holding some papers. There is a vacant chair.)

TAYLOR: (Beckoning.) Come in, Miss Johnson. Please have a seat.

(MARY JOHNSON enters.)

MARY JOHNSON: Yes, sir.

TAYLOR: Miss Johnson, I truly regret this, but the data tells the story. You are packaging an average of 675 ball bearings per hour. Every other girl in the plant packages over 700. This is not acceptable. Ms. Johnson, I know how conscientious you are. No one could have worked harder during our re-training sessions. But the science is clear. You simply fall below your peers in manual dexterity.

MARY JOHNSON: My husband died. I have two children. Times are very hard. I need to keep this job.

TAYLOR: Miss Johnson—Mary. I understand your position. I have made every effort. We tried you in the Inspection Room. You did very well identifying flaws in the ball bearings. But you could not roll the balls fast enough between your fingers. I know you are an intelligent girl, so you understand that the Simonds Rolling Machine Company cannot compete unless we have first-rate people in every position. If we keep you on, the jobs of the other workers are in jeopardy because of the loss in competitiveness.

MARY JOHNSON: Surely, you don’t really think that keeping me on will bring down this company. I don’t mind working during break time to make my quota. I can even work into the next shift.

TAYLOR: I’m sorry, Mrs. Johnson, but that is impossible.

(MARY JOHNSON stands and seems to leave the room. But she stops and turns at the periphery of the stage and watches the rest of the scene. TAYLOR stands slowly with obvious unhappiness. He turns Upstage, steps back and forth, deep in thought, and then exits. The NARRATOR enters.)

NARRATOR: In 1912, workers at two federal munitions factories went out on strike protesting the brutal working conditions that they were subjected to under the regime of scientific management. Because strikes in munitions plants had implications for national defense, Congressman William B. Wilson, Democrat of Pennsylvania, opened Congressional Hearings on the work stoppage, and he expanded the scope of his investigation to include scientific management. Wilson had begun his working life in the anthracite mines of Central Pennsylvania and had become a union shop steward and then a union officer before turning to politics. He was no friend of the owners of mines and factories, and he took a dim view of scientific management.

(WILSON and his AIDE enter with the NARRATOR observing them.)

AIDE: So, you’re gonna take on Frederick Taylor?

WILSON: Yes, it’s time to knock him down a few pegs. It’s time to show the nation what scientific management really is, what it *does* to human beings. I know a thing or two about shoveling. I *know* what it means to push your body just short of the breaking point, with bosses watching you, men who will fire you if you slow down for just a few minutes.

AIDE: Do you think Taylor really believes in his “industrial Utopia”?

WILSON: Fred Taylor started out as an ambitious young man who would do anything to make his superiors happy. Then, he became one of our greatest engineers. Then, a half-baked social theorist. He *does* believe he is improving the lot of Humankind. He thinks he’s a second-day Moses, leading us all to the Promised Land. His sincerity makes him eloquent, which makes him even more dangerous.

(Blackout.)

# Scene 3

(Lights.)

(WILSON and AIDE enter with MARY JOHNSON. TAYLOR stands isolated.)

MARY JOHNSON: Mr. Wilson, I’d like to take a moment to speak to Mr. Taylor.

WILSON: To Mr. Taylor? Very well.

(MARY JOHNSON approaches TAYLOR, who is surprised to see her.)

MARY JOHNSON: Mr. Taylor, I remember how hard you to tried to increase my speed at the ball bearing plant. I know how badly you wanted me to improve my output. I think I should have kept my job. Life has been very hard for me since I was fired. I will testify for Congressman Wilson. This is my opportunity to tell the nation what can go wrong under scientific management. But, Mr. Taylor, I believe you are a decent man, and I want you to know that I have nothing against you personally.

TAYLOR: Thank you, Mary. You will be testifying under oath, and you must tell the truth as you understand it. I accept this.

(MARY JOHNSON returns to WILSON and his AIDE, and they walk across the stage and exit, presumably into the hearing room.)

(Blackout.)

# Scene 4

(Lights.)

(All frozen: TAYLOR is seated. WILSON stands over TAYLOR as though aggressively questioning him. The AIDE is seated near WILSON. The NARRATOR is seated as someone taking part in or just observing the hearing.)

(The NARRATOR stands. Then the rest unfreeze.)

NARRATOR: Like King Lear, Frederick Taylor knew himself “but slenderly.” Unable to fully grasp the harsh side of scientific management, he prepared poorly for the hearings. He was destroyed by Congressman Wilson’s unyielding questioning and Wilson’s parade of witnesses—men and women who had suffered greatly in organizations that had adopted scientific management.

WILSON: Mr. Taylor, are we all “first-rate” men and women? Tell me, what is to happen to those who are not “first rate”?

TAYLOR: (Speaking confusedly.) First-rate. Yes, we all want to be first rate. Every company wants first-rate workers *(Becoming incoherent.)* First rate is essential. But we will train. Yes, first-rate.

WILSON: What can you say to women like Mary Johnson? What do you say to Louis Gromke, whose joints were permanently damaged shoveling for Bethlehem Steel?

TAYLOR: (Speaking confusedly and wistfully.) Mary Johnson. Very intelligent. Very sweet girl. Tried very hard. I tried to teach. I am sorry. But, companies must remain competitive. Efficiency is the key. Productivity . . . Mary Johnson. Sweet girl. I am sorry, very sorry.

(TAYLOR breaks down, bends forward, and lowers his head into his hands. No longer just someone in the hearing room, the NARRATOR, stands.)

NARRATOR: Under William Wilson’s questioning, Taylor collapsed and apparently suffered a nervous breakdown. Out of respect for Frederick Taylor and the decorum of Congress, Wilson excused TAYLOR from further participation in the hearings and had portions of Taylor’s testimony expunged from the Congressional Record.

WILSON: I call for a recess. . . Someone assist Mr. Taylor!

(The AIDE joins TAYLOR and walks him offstage.)

NARRATOR: After the hearings, Frederick and Lou Spooner Taylor undertook extended travel in Europe. Upon returning, Taylor scaled back his participation in public life. Four years later, at age 59, he died a very wealthy but deeply disillusioned man. Scientific management, of course, continued to transform conditions in the workplace, as Mr. Hong and the workers in his assembly plant know well.

(TAYLOR enters and steps slowly across the stage. He speaks as though remembering his own words at a Boxwood Talk.)

TAYLOR: An industrial Utopia lies directly in our future. Men will produce more. Greater production means that goods will sell at lower prices, enabling workers to enjoy material possessions they have never been able to afford. Labor strife will cease. . . .

(MARY JOHNSON enters and confronts TAYLOR.)

TAYLOR: . . . employees will love their employers. Employers will care for their employees. This is the promise of scientific management.

MARY JOHNSON: I think I should have kept my job!

(The SIMONDS EXECUTIVE enters and addresses the audience.)

SIMONDS EXECUTIVE: *(To MARY and the audience.)* The Simonds Rolling Machine Company must stay competitive.

(WILSON enters and addresses the audience.)

WILSON: He’s a great engineer. But as a social theorist, he is dangerous. He truly believes he’s a latter-day Moses, but his Promised Land runs short on milk and honey.

(Blackout.)