

Lives that Lift

C L Paddock 1935



Up From Slavery

Many of the world's greatest men and women began life under the most forbidding circumstances. Of humble birth, and with few advantages, they have traveled a rugged path to success and usefulness, while others more favored enjoyed only a mediocre life. We like to read of the section man who became president of the railroad, or of the journey of some ambitious young man from log cabin to fame and fortune.

One of the most inspiring biographies of the past century is that of Booker T. Washington. Although he has laid down his burdens and passed on to his rest, his life shall ever be an encouragement to struggling young men and women regardless of their color.

His birth on the slave-worked plantation in Virginia meant little more than the arrival of a new colt or some other animal. In the midst of the most wretched, miserable, and disheartening surroundings his young life began. The little, one-roomed log cabin in which he was born had no floor except mother earth, no glass windows, and a door that was only a door in name. There were wide cracks in the sides of the building, and the openings made for windows let in more cold than light. In this humble cabin lived Booker, his older brother John, his sister Amanda, and his mother, who was the plantation cook. About his father he knew nothing. The mother was busy from early morning until late at night and the children received little attention from her. For a bed they had a pile of rags on the dirt floor. Never did they sit down to the table for a meal, but grabbed a piece of bread or meat now and then, much as an animal does, or if anything was left from the table in the big mansion where the white owner lived, the children might share in this.

School for the slaves was not thought of. Booker says he remembers going as far as the schoolhouse door to carry his young mistress' books, but he never got inside the door, although in his little heart he longed to go. His first pair of shoes were of wood. One of his most trying ordeals as a slave boy was to break in a new flax shirt. It was a painful ordeal, but it was either wear the shirt and endure the torture or go without anything on, for this one garment was all he had to wear.

The Civil War came and at its close the freedom of the slaves. Booker's stepfather, immediately after the Declaration of Independence for the slaves, found work in a salt furnace in West Virginia and

decided to move his family thither. It was a long eventful trip over the mountains, the simple household effects being packed into a cart, and the children walking most of the distance, which was several hundred miles.

Settling in Malden, the stepfather soon began work in the salt furnace, and Booker was taken along, though only a boy, to help earn a living. They began work as early as four in the morning. It was here at his work that the little fellow gathered his first book knowledge, and this bit of learning was as a tiny seed planted in his young heart, which began to grow forthwith, and could not be choked out by the most discouraging circumstances nor the gloomiest outlook. His stepfather's number in the salt works was eighteen, and at the close of the day the foreman of the packers would come and put on each barrel they had filled the figure 18. Booker soon learned this figure and also how to make it. This was the beginning of his education. He determined then and there if he accomplished nothing else in life he would get enough education so he could read books and papers. He told his mother of his aspirations, and sharing in his ambitions, she managed in some way to secure for him a copy of Webster's -old "blue-back" spelling book, which he began at once to devour.

About this time he got added inspiration from a young colored boy who came to Malden. This young fellow had learned to read, and at the close of the day's work the colored people would gather around him and he would read aloud to them from the newspaper. Booker envied this young hero, and his attainments seemed to be the acme of accomplishment.

Booker implored, entreated, begged his parents to permit him to go to school, but he had a commercial value to the father and he hesitated to give his consent. It was finally arranged that the boy might go to school provided he would arise at four in the morning and work in the salt furnace until nine, and then return to work again after school. To this Booker willingly agreed.

Other difficulties presented themselves. Up to this time in his experience he had never worn anything on his head, but he found on going to school that all the other boys had hats or caps. He had no money with which to buy a cap, so his mother helped him over this difficulty by making a cap for him out of two pieces of "homespun."

The next problem which confronted him was in regard to his name. The first morning in school the teacher began to call the roll and Booker noticed that all the other boys and girls had two names, and some of them even three. He had never known of any other name than Booker, and was perplexed of course. By the time the teacher reached him, he had solved the problem and responded, "Booker Washington," a name which followed him until his death. That problem was solved.

Circumstances compelled him to stop school and he found work in a mine with his stepfather. One day in the darkness of the mine he heard a conversation between two of the workmen, and this conversation influenced his afterlife. From this dialogue between the two miners he learned of a school for colored people who were too poor to pay money for their schooling. In this school the young people could work to pay for their education. At that time he did not find out just where the school was, how many miles away it might be, nor how to reach it, but then and there he determined he would go to Hampton, and this ambition he kept constantly in mind. He told his mother of his cherished plans and she encouraged him in his dreams.

The great day came, and he started on the five-hundred-mile journey to Hampton. He traveled the first day by stage, and at the end of the day when the coach stopped for the night, sought shelter with the other passengers in a hotel. Up to this time he had not realized that the color of his skin might be another hindrance to him, but the fact was impressed upon him that night, for the proprietor

of the hotel refused him either food or lodging. All through the long night he walked and moved about to keep warm.

By walking and begging rides, he reached Richmond, Virginia, tired and exhausted from his long journey. Finding no lodging he spent the night under a slight elevation in a boardwalk. In the morning he found work helping to unload a cargo of pig iron. He worked here for a number of days, going back each night to his bed beneath the sidewalk. Many years after, the citizens of Richmond tendered him a public reception not far from this same spot.

In his autobiography he says the first glimpse he got of the school at Hampton paid him for all the sacrifices he had made to get there. He was not the most promising-looking student as he presented himself for entrance to the school, for he had been a long time without a bath, or a change of clothing, to say nothing about his lack of proper food.

His entrance examination was the sweeping of a class room in the college. The head teacher handed him a broom saying, "The adjoining recitation-room needs sweeping. Take the broom and sweep it." Realizing that much depended upon this simple test, he swept the room three times and then dusted it four times, not missing a nook or corner. When he had finished, the teacher came to inspect his work, and taking her white handkerchief rubbed it over the table and some -of the woodwork. Not finding one particle of dust or dirt she quietly remarked, "I guess you will do to enter this institution." To him these were the sweetest words his ears had ever heard. He had passed his college entrance examination, and he was one of the happiest souls on earth.

There were many things to learn. "Life at Hampton," says Mr. Washington in his autobiography, "was a constant revelation to me; was constantly taking me into a new world. The matter of having meals at regular hours, of eating on a table cloth, using a napkin, and the use of the bathtub and the toothbrush, as well as the use of sheets upon the bed, were all new to me."

When he went to Hampton he had never slept in a bed between two sheets. So the sheets were a real puzzle to him. The first night he slept under both sheets, and the second night on top of them, but by watching the other boys learned how to sleep between them.

When you think of the fact that he arrived at Hampton with only fifty cents in his pocket and that he finished the course offered there, working his way, your imagination will picture some of the struggles this young man had, so we need not mention them in detail.

Finishing the course of study at Hampton he returned to his former home in Malden and was elected to teach the colored school. "This," he says, "was the beginning of one of the happiest periods of my life. I felt now I had the opportunity to help the people of my home town to a higher life." The only true happiness any of us enjoy in this life comes from having been a blessing to some one else. Working from early morning until late at night, he endeavored to teach the colored boys and girls, not only to read and write, but to wash their hands and to comb their hair, to use the toothbrush, and other things which a people just out of slavery had not learned.

That he might do more for his own people, he started a school at Tuskegee, in 1881, patterned after the school at Hampton. Here the colored young people were given books, but they were taught much more. Here they learned the dignity of labor. Here they got their "first taste of what it meant to live a life of unselfishness," and learned that "the happiest individuals are those who do the most to make others useful and happy."

At Hampton Mr. Washington had learned a lesson which he sought to impart to all his Students; a lesson which every young person should learn, that "It is not a disgrace to labor. That we should love labor,

not for its financial value alone, but for labor's own sake and for the independence and self-reliance which the ability to do something which the world wants done, brings." The young man or woman who has learned this lesson has an advantage over the one who has not come to realize this fact.

The life of Booker T. Washington shows the power of a dominant purpose, and that race, color or environment cannot keep us from reaching the goal of our ideals. His life of struggle should be an encouragement to struggling young men and women. His ambitions and attainments should inspire to higher ideals and to loftier accomplishments. It would be impossible to estimate the blessings he brought to his own race, but his life lives on, and of him it may be truly said that "he being dead yet speaketh."

