Up from Slavery: An Autobiography

Booker T. Washington

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AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

By Booker T. Washington

This volume is dedicated to my Wife
MRS. MARGARET JAMES WASHINGTON
And to my Brother
MR. JOHN H. WASHINGTON
Whose patience, fidelity, and hard work have gone far
to make the work at Tuskegee successful.

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UP FROM SLAVERY:

Preface

This volume is the outgrowth of a series of articles, dealing with incidents in my life, which were published consecutively in the Outlook. While they were appearing in that magazine I was constantly surprised at the number of requests which came to me from all parts of the country, asking that the articles be permanently preserved in book form. I am most grateful to the Outlook for permission to gratify these requests.

I have tried to tell a simple, straightforward story, with no attempt at embellishment. My regret is that what I have attempted to do has been done so imperfectly. The greater part of my time and strength is required for the executive work connected with the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute, and in securing the money necessary for the support of the institution. Much of what I have said has been written on board trains, or at hotels or railroad stations while I have been waiting for trains, or during the moments that I could spare from my work while at Tuskegee. Without the painstaking and generous assistance of Mr. Max Bennett Thrasher I could not have succeeded in any satisfactory degree.

Introduction

The details of Mr. Washington's early life, as frankly set down in "Up from Slavery," do not give quite a whole view of his education. He had the training that a coloured youth receives at Hampton, which, indeed, the autobiography does explain. But the reader does not get his intellectual pedigree, for Mr. Washington himself, perhaps, does not as clearly understand it as another man might. The truth is he had a training during the most impressionable period of his life that was very extraordinary, such a training as few men of his generation have had. To see its full meaning one must start in the Hawaiian Islands half a century or more ago.* There Samuel Armstrong, a youth of missionary parents, earned enough money to pay his expenses at an American college. Equipped with this small sum and the earnestness that the undertaking implied, he came to Williams College when Dr. Mark Hopkins was president. Williams College had many good things for youth in that day, as it has in this, but the greatest was the strong personality of its famous president. Every student does not profit by a great teacher; but perhaps no young man ever came under the influence of Dr. Hopkins, whose whole nature was so ripe for profit by such an experience as young Armstrong. He lived in the family of President Hopkins, and thus had a training that was wholly out of the common; and this training had much to do with the development of his own strong character, whose originality and force we are only beginning to appreciate.

* For this interesting view of Mr. Washington's education, I am indebted to Robert C. Ogden, Esq., Chairman of the Board of Trustees of Hampton Institute and the intimate friend of General Armstrong during the whole period of his educational work.

In turn, Samuel Armstrong, the founder of Hampton Institute, took up his work as a trainer of youth. He had very raw material, and doubtless most of his pupils failed to get the greatest lessons from him; but, as he had been a peculiarly receptive pupil of Dr. Hopkins, so Booker Washington became a peculiarly receptive pupil of his. To the formation of Mr. Washington's character, then, went the missionary zeal of New England, influenced by one of the strongest personalities in modern education, and the wide-reaching moral earnestness of General Armstrong himself. These influences are easily recognizable in Mr. Washington to-day by men who knew Dr. Hopkins and General Armstrong.

I got the cue to Mr. Washington's character from a very simple incident many years ago. I had never seen him, and I knew little about him, except that he was the head of a school at Tuskegee, Alabama. I had occasion to write to him, and I addressed him as "The Rev. Booker T. Washington." In his reply there was no mention of my addressing him as a clergyman. But when I had occasion to write to him again, and persisted in making him a preacher, his second letter brought a postscript: "I have no claim to 'Rev.'" I knew most of the coloured men who at that time had become prominent as leaders of their race, but I had not then known one who was neither a politician nor a preacher; and I had not heard of the head of an important coloured school who was not a preacher. "A new kind of man in the coloured world," I said to myself—"a new kind of man surely if he looks upon his task as an economic one instead of a theological one." I wrote him an apology for mistaking him for a preacher.

The first time that I went to Tuskegee I was asked to make an address to the school on Sunday evening. I sat upon the platform of the large

chapel and looked forth on a thousand coloured faces, and the choir of a hundred or more behind me sang a familiar religious melody, and the whole company joined in the chorus with unction. I was the only white man under the roof, and the scene and the songs made an impression on me that I shall never forget. Mr. Washington arose and asked them to sing one after another of the old melodies that I had heard all my life; but I had never before heard them sung by a thousand voices nor by the voices of educated Negroes. I had associated them with the Negro of the past, not with the Negro who was struggling upward. They brought to my mind the plantation, the cabin, the slave, not the freedman in quest of education. But on the plantation and in the cabin they had never been sung as these thousand students sang them. I saw again all the old plantations that I had ever seen; the whole history of the Negro ran through my mind; and the inexpressible pathos of his life found expression in these songs as I had never before felt it.

And the future? These were the ambitious youths of the race, at work with an earnestness that put to shame the conventional student life of most educational institutions. Another song rolled up along the rafters. And as soon as silence came, I found myself in front of this extraordinary mass of faces, thinking not of them, but of that long and unhappy chapter in our country's history which followed the one great structural mistake of the Fathers of the Republic; thinking of the one continuous great problem that generations of statesmen had wrangled over, and a million men fought about, and that had so dwarfed the mass of English men in the Southern States as to hold them back a hundred years behind their fellows in every other part of the world—in England, in Australia, and in the Northern and Western

States; I was thinking of this dark shadow that had oppressed every large-minded statesman from Jefferson to Lincoln. These thousand young men and women about me were victims of it. I, too, was an innocent victim of it. The whole Republic was a victim of that fundamental error of importing Africa into America. I held firmly to the first article of my faith that the Republic must stand fast by the principle of a fair ballot; but I recalled the wretched mess that Reconstruction had made of it; I recalled the low level of public life in all the "black" States. Every effort of philanthropy seemed to have miscarried, every effort at correcting abuses seemed of doubtful value, and the race friction seemed to become severer. Here was the century-old problem in all its pathos seated singing before me. Who were the more to be pitied—these innocent victims of an ancient wrong, or I and men like me, who had inherited the problem? I had long ago thrown aside illusions and theories, and was willing to meet the facts face to face, and to do whatever in God's name a man might do towards saving the next generation from such a burden. But I felt the weight of twenty well-nigh hopeless years of thought and reading and observation; for the old difficulties remained and new ones had sprung up. Then I saw clearly that the way out of a century of blunders had been made by this man who stood beside me and was introducing me to this audience. Before me was the material he had used. All about me was the indisputable evidence that he had found the natural line of development. He had shown the way. Time and patience and encouragement and work would do the rest.

It was then more clearly than ever before that I understood the patriotic significance of Mr. Washington's work. It is this conception of it and of him that I have ever since carried with me. It is on this

that his claim to our gratitude rests.

To teach the Negro to read, whether English, or Greek, or Hebrew, butters no parsnips. To make the Negro work, that is what his master did in one way and hunger has done in another; yet both these left Southern life where they found it. But to teach the Negro to do skilful work, as men of all the races that have risen have worked,—responsible work, which IS education and character; and most of all when Negroes so teach Negroes to do this that they will teach others with a missionary zeal that puts all ordinary philanthropic efforts to shame,—this is to change the whole economic basis of life and the whole character of a people.

The plan itself is not a new one. It was worked out at Hampton Institute, but it was done at Hampton by white men. The plan had, in fact, been many times theoretically laid down by thoughtful students of Southern life. Handicrafts were taught in the days of slavery on most well-managed plantations. But Tuskegee is, nevertheless, a brand-new chapter in the history of the Negro, and in the history of the knottiest problem we have ever faced. It not only makes “a carpenter of a man; it makes a man of a carpenter.” In one sense, therefore, it is of greater value than any other institution for the training of men and women that we have, from Cambridge to Palo Alto. It is almost the only one of which it may be said that it points the way to a new epoch in a large area of our national life.

To work out the plan on paper, or at a distance—that is one thing. For a white man to work it out—that too, is an easy thing. For a coloured man to work it out in the South, where, in its constructive period, he was necessarily misunderstood by his own people as well as by the

whites, and where he had to adjust it at every step to the strained race relations—that is so very different and more difficult a thing that the man who did it put the country under lasting obligations to him.

It was not and is not a mere educational task. Anybody could teach boys trades and give them an elementary education. Such tasks have been done since the beginning of civilization. But this task had to be done with the rawest of raw material, done within the civilization of the dominant race, and so done as not to run across race lines and social lines that are the strongest forces in the community. It had to be done for the benefit of the whole community. It had to be done, moreover, without local help, in the face of the direst poverty, done by begging, and done in spite of the ignorance of one race and the prejudice of the other.

No man living had a harder task, and a task that called for more wisdom to do it right. The true measure of Mr. Washington's success is, then, not his teaching the pupils of Tuskegee, nor even gaining the support of philanthropic persons at a distance, but this—that every Southern white man of character and of wisdom has been won to a cordial recognition of the value of the work, even men who held and still hold to the conviction that a mere book education for the Southern blacks under present conditions is a positive evil. This is a demonstration of the efficiency of the Hampton-Tuskegee idea that stands like the demonstration of the value of democratic institutions themselves—a demonstration made so clear in spite of the greatest odds that it is no longer open to argument.

Consider the change that has come in twenty years in the discussion of the Negro problem. Two or three decades ago social philosophers

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