

The Slave Boy Who Became A Great Leader

by Archer Wallace

Some time about the year 1858 or 1859 a child was born in a log cabin in Virginia, U.S.A. The parents of the child were slaves, and utterly without education. When the child grew to be a man he could never find out the exact date, or even the year of his birth. The first things he remembered were the scenes around the squalid, little log cabin, where his earliest years were spent. The cabin itself was sixteen feet by fourteen. It not only had to serve as the sole home for the family, but was used as the kitchen for the plantation. There were no windows in it, only openings in the side which let in the light. The same openings, of course, let in the chilly air in winter. A broken-down door hung on uncertain hinges. In one corner of the miserable cabin there was a "cat hole"—a hole about seven or eight inches square—to enable the family cat to pass in or out. As there were half a dozen other holes in the cabin walls, this contrivance seemed unnecessary. There was no wooden floor to the cabin, the bare earth being considered all that was necessary. In the centre of the floor there was a large, deep hole which was used to store sweet potatoes during the winter. There was no stove in the cabin, all the cooking being done over an open fireplace.

The little boy—whose name was Booker Taliaferro Washington—never knew what it was to sleep in a bed. With his brother, John, and his sister, Amanda, he slept on a bundle of filthy rags on the dirty floor. The poor mother, who acted as cook to the slaves on the plantation, had little or no time to give to the training of her children, so they just grew up, and early learned to do hard work.

The family never sat down around the table together for a meal, nor was God's blessing ever asked upon the food. Like most other slaves at that time, they hardly ate like civilized beings. The children got their meals very much like dumb animals. It was a piece of bread here, and a scrap of meat there, and perhaps a potato in another place. Sometimes one member of the family would eat out of a pot, or skillet, while another would be eating from a tin plate on his knees, often using nothing but the hands to hold the food. One day, when young Booker was over at the slave-owner's house, he saw two of the young ladies eating gingerbread. It seemed to him, at that time, that the most tempting thing in the world was a piece of gingerbread, and he made a solemn vow that if ever he could afford to buy some gingerbread he would do so.

Young Booker had little time for play, in fact he hardly understood what the word meant. He cleaned the yard, carried water to the slaves in the field, and once a week took corn to the mill. This last job was heartbreaking. A heavy bag of corn would be thrown over the back of a horse, but as the horse jogged along the uneven road, often the bag would fall off, and probably young Booker would fall with it. He was not strong enough to get it back upon the horse, and so he would have to wait, maybe for several hours, for a chance passer-by to help him. These hours of waiting would often bring bitter tears, for he knew he would be late in reaching home. It was a lonely, dark road, and he was much afraid, and besides, when he did get home, he generally received a severe flogging for being so late.

When Booker was about eight years of age the slaves were liberated, and he, with his mother and brother and sister, set out for West Virginia, where his stepfather worked in the salt mines. The family packed up their few belongings, and, with very little money, set out on the long and tedious journey of several hundred miles. The children walked most of the way, until their feet were sore and blistered. It took them several weeks to make the journey, and they slept, either in the open or in some abandoned cabin by the roadside.

Although he was only a child, Booker was put to work in the salt mines as soon as they reached Maiden, where his stepfather lived. There was no play for him, nothing but hard work. Sometimes he had to rise at four o'clock in the morning, and work until he was nearly dropping from sheer exhaustion.

Once when he was a little fellow, he had taken some books to the school house for his young mistress. He looked in and saw several dozen white boys and girls learning to read and write, and it seemed a wonderful thing to him. He thought that getting into school must be like getting into Paradise. Once he got settled in Maiden a great desire to learn to read came over him. In some way a copy of Webster's spelling book found its way to their cabin, and he eagerly began to learn the alphabet. At that time there was no single person of his race whom he knew, who could spell, and he was afraid to ask the white people. But in some way he learned what the letters stood for, and soon he began to spell out simple words. His mother was totally ignorant, but she encouraged him all she could.

About this time some kind of a school for coloured children was opened in the town, and a young person who had learned to read was put in charge. Booker's stepfather, however, decided that he could not afford to lose the money that he was earning, and that he must continue to work in the salt mines. This was a most crushing blow to the little boy who was so anxious to learn. However, he succeeded in persuading the teacher to give him lessons at night, and he worked hard, although he was often tired in body. After a while he was allowed to attend day school, on the understanding that he also did his work in the mines. So he worked in the mines from very early in the morning until nine o'clock, when school opened, and again he returned when school hours were over.

When he did get to school he found difficulties. All the other boys had "store" caps, of which they were very proud. Booker had none, nor had his mother any money wherewith to buy one, but she sewed two pieces of cloth together, which answered for a "cap". The other boys made great fun of his homemade cap, but he knew it was the best that his mother could do, so he tried to ignore their ridicule. Young Booker had heaps of trouble, and difficulties at every turn, but there never was a time in all those hard years when he did not have the determination to secure an education.

One day, while he was working in the mine, young Booker overheard two men talking about an advanced school for coloured boys at some distance away. In the darkness he crept closer, and he heard one of the men say that opportunities for work were provided, so that worthy pupils could pay part of their board, and at the same time be taught some trade. That was a turning point in his life. He determined there and then to get to that school. Once he had formed that resolution, the idea never left him day or night.

By means of very hard work he managed to save enough money to start him on the road to the school, which was known as Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute. After many hardships and bitter experiences, he arrived there, but when he presented himself before the head teacher she hesitated about taking him in. He was tired after the long, weary journey, and his clothes were worn threadbare. He looked like a worthless tramp. After some hesitation the teacher gave him a broom, and told him to sweep a room.

Did he sweep that room clean? He never tackled anything with so much delight. He swept it, then dusted it four times. He rubbed every piece of furniture in that room until it shone. He felt that his future depended upon the way he cleaned that room. When he had finished the head teacher came and examined his work. She couldn't find a particle of dust anywhere. "I guess you will do to enter this

institution," she said.

He spent three years at Hampton. They were hard years in many ways, for he had little money, and besides, he had to learn everything, almost from the beginning. But he was sheer grit, and things which would have discouraged others only made him more determined. He soon gained a grasp of his studies, and, by very hard grinding, worked his way to the front in his classes. After his course was completed he was made a teacher in the institution, and put in charge of a group of Indians, with whom he did remarkably well.

Then a great opportunity opened up for him. A normal school for coloured people was to be opened in Tuskegee, Alabama. A great many schools for coloured children had been opened since the abolition of slavery, but most of the teachers themselves were not educated, and this normal school was instituted for their benefit. Booker T. Washington was asked if he would take charge of it, and he gladly did so. He began his work in a disused shanty with about thirty pupils, practically all of whom had been trying to teach school.

Soon the shanty became too small for those who came, and Booker Washington saw a large, old disused plantation house, which he decided to purchase and use as a school. He succeeded in raising the necessary five hundred dollars, and soon the whole school moved into the larger premises.

Under his leadership the school grew by leaps and bounds. The coloured people were so thankful for the institution that they brought live cattle, as they could afford it, and these animals were used to maintain the institution, and as a means to train the people for farming. Very soon the school owned two hundred horses, colts, mules, oxen, calves, and over seven hundred pigs, sheep and goats. It became necessary to add to the buildings, and soon the work of Tuskegee Institute became known the whole world over. After a few years the school which Booker Washington began in an old shanty, had grown to be an institution with eleven hundred pupils and a staff of eighty-six officers and teachers.

Booker T. Washington—now known everywhere as Professor Washington—became one of the greatest orators in the United States. Often he made speeches before tremendous audiences, and always succeeded in raising the white man's idea of the coloured people. He became a close personal friend of Grover Cleveland, at that time President of the United States, and several times he was invited to the White House, to be guest of the President. Later, he visited England, and was welcomed by Queen Victoria, and many of the most distinguished people of Great Britain. He received the honorary degree of Master of Arts from Harvard University, and it is safe to say that the little boy, who began life under such great handicaps, became one of the most highly respected of the world's citizens.

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