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1500 Words

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A RIDE WITH BOOKER T. WASHINGTON

by Ruth Rugby

A few years ago I had the pleasure of riding with Booker T. Washington, the great Negro educator, on a visit to his old home in West Virginia. He pointed out landmarks and spots of interest around which clustered many stirring and tender memories.

Following the county road called Piedmont, and skirting the Kanawha River -- a combination of mountain and river scenery than which there is none more beautiful -- our first halt was made at a place called before the War the "Licks," where herds of deer used to gather to lick the salt water that found its way to the surface. Since then the name has been changed to the higher sounding one of Kanawha Salines.

"I too," said Mr. Washington, "love to come back occasionally for a lick of the salt and the pungent air I used to breathe as a boy."

After a close scrutiny of the surrounding country he pointed out the spot upon which stood his mother's cabin, the first home of which he had any decided impressions. No vestige of it remained and the cornfield was photographed with Mr. Washington looking upon the site of his boyhood home.

We drove along, now by river, now by mountain, passing the ruins of many salt furnaces, of which nothing was left but huge logs and half tumbling stone chimneys to mark the spot where once all was activity. The coal industry had completely superceded that of salt

making and only one salt furnace was still in operation.

When Booker Washington made salt and dug coal, there must have occurred to him often while handling the whitest and blackest of minerals, the comparison of the white man and the black - the difference in their conditions and what constituted it. Perhaps he reasoned that if he could not make black white, or white black, he could so improve the black as to make things more equal. While he worked the black diamonds and shoveled the glistening salt crystals he was unconsciously shaping his own destiny. The diamond in the rough was to become the polished stone, and he himself the salt of the earth.

In those days, to his young country-bred eyes looking upon mountain and river, came visions of what might lie beyond their boundaries. "Often," said he, "I wondered what was upon the other side of the mountains." The thought, the wish to know, nerved him to go forth. Cannot you picture this small sober lad, some years after the Civil War, standing upon the banks of the Great Kanawha in West Virginia -- "Great" as distinguished from the "Little" Kanawha -- casting pebbles onto the clear surface, watching the ripples in ever widening circles - typical of his own life? Dropped like a pebble into the valley of the Kanawha, the circle of his life widened and widened until finally its radius touched a foreign shore.

Looking toward the house and thinking of the influence of its sweet mistress and the wholesome atmosphere that must have pervaded the place, I asked Mr. Washington whether he thought heredity or environment had the greater influence upon the character. After a slight deliberation he answered: "I think environment."

As we drove through the sleepy village of Malden (bad den) where it is said the boys can throw a brick around a corner and hit

the object aimed at, enjoying the reputation of being veritable "Davids" in slinging stones - the old question presented itself: "Can any good come out of Nazareth?" It was answered in the affirmative by the sight of the earnest man sitting opposite.

Driving homeward, someone told the story of the burial away back in the hills of an old colored woman named Aunt Peggy Rushinbow. While the preacher was pronouncing the last words of the service, he heard several dull thuds on the ground. With the "Ashes to ashes and dust to dust" still on his lips, he looked around to see two sisters lay out a large snake that had crawled up to get a chance at another poor woman, but whose heel had verified the prophecy and bruised the serpent's head. At the end of the story, Mr. Washington characteristically asked in his boyish way, "What is that the sign of?" No one seemed to know, and naturally the conversation turned to signs and superstitions, Mr. Washington remarking that he had always avoided Friday. As many of his white brethren do the same he was not alone in this.

Stopping to water the horses another suggestive proceeding was indulged, that of eating watermelon in the good old-fashioned way of fitting the slices to the curves of the mouth. The remainder of the feast was distributed among some hungry looking pickaninnies whose big eyes pleaded for "only de rine", but from the attack made by the travelers things looked for awhile as if there "Wan't gwine to be no rine."

Speaking of his trip abroad, Mr. Washington said that the thing that most interested him in France was the people. He never tired watching them. While in Paris he attended the Grand Pre and witnessed his first horse race. In England he was most impressed with the farm where women are taught agriculture. When graduated they take charge of large estates and manage them.

Booker Washington was very fond of patriotic songs, and his eye kindled as he described the singing of the Marsellaise by the people of France. He was visibly affected by the singing of the State Song of West Virginia:

"Is it any wonder then
That my heart with rapture thrills
As I stand once more with loved ones
On the West Virginia hills.

Chorus:

Oh, the hills, the beautiful hills,
How I love the West Virginia hills."

Continuing the journey we passed many old homesteads fast falling to decay. Said Mr. Washington: "How small everything looks to me now; places that used to seem so big, mountains so high, rivers so deep and wide have all dwindled."

As man grows in mental stature and takes on more of the divine nature, is it not given him to see with truer eyes the real proportion of things, and their relative values as well?

The conversation growing rather serious, a turn was given it and a laugh enjoyed at the expense of Mr. Washington, who noticed a sow with a litter of pigs feeding beside the road and remarked: "The pig is my favorite animal." He added, with a laugh as he saw the ludicrous side of it: "Not a very high order of life, but nevertheless I raise pigs at Tuskegee and my wife raises ducks."

Thus, I reflected, hogs take to mud and ducks to water; mud and water have an affinity, therefore, Mr. and Mrs. Washington have something in common, even in the selection of their pets. By what process evolution might be brought about for the hog I could not see, but no doubt Mr. Washington, by some intricate reasoning, settled the matter

to his own satisfaction and saw a future even for this wallower in the mire. Or perhaps he took a purely material view as his mind reverted to the days when "Mammy" gave him "cracklin' bread" made from crisp pieces of fat left at the lard rendering.

The next stop was made at the old home of General Lewis Ruffner, where Booker Washington worked as a house servant. Many changes had taken place, but Mr. Washington stood for his picture under an old locust tree where often his boyish feet had rested, and for another at the spot where an old cider mill used to stand. "Such apples," said he, "as used to grow in the orchard I shall never taste again." The old vineyard was gone, but on a sunny side of the hill was a part of the peach orchard where the "cornmeal" peaches grew.

In the end, as in the beginning, the impression one always got of the "Sage of Tuskegee" was his earnestness and simplicity, so marked in manner, speech and dress. About him was none of the smart Alecism that characterizes the average educated Negro. He was a man with a purpose, and that outlined in his face. Facts were the things upon which he built. No visionary skeleton work for him. His people can never accuse him of forcing them to make bricks without straw, for at Tuskegee they grew the straw first.

This century is seeing wonderful things. From despised, down-trodden races have arisen some of the greatest reformers. Who may question that this savior of his race was called to the work he has done; that of promoting the Universal Brotherhood which today is quickening the pulse of the world, making more hearts to beat in unison, more heads to think alike, and more hands to clasp in the common cause of humanity.

THE END

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BOYHOOD OF BOOKER T. WASHINGTON

by Ruth Rugby

In the closing years of slavery a little brown-skinned babe opened his eyes to the light 'mid the green fields of Virginia, unconscious alike of his color or of the yoke which rested upon him, but destined to be an instrument in the removal of the scars of that yoke from the shoulders of his people.

During the early days after the Civil War many negro emigrants crossed the Allegheny Mountains and sought homes in the valley of the Kanawha, famous at that day for its salt industry. Among them was the mother of Booker Taliaferro Washington. He was then but a child with only a vague understanding of the stirring times in which he lived. His earliest recollection of his birthplace, Hales Ford in Franklin County, Virginia, was of tumbling around the hard ground floor of his mother's cabin, of hearing the people talk in whispers of the war being waged around them, of the colored folks being summoned one day to the big house where a strange man stood on the porch reading a paper, of all the negroes clapping their hands and shouting "Glory Halleluiah! Praise de Lord!", of his asking his mother questions and being told that they were free.

Then came the journey to West Virginia and the setting up of the first home under freedom's flag. The first school Booker Washington attended is standing today in the village of Malden, West Virginia, at that time the commercial center of the valley. It was used both as

a church and school and has since been turned into a dwelling. Over the school presided a colored preacher by the name of Lewis Rice, for whom Booker Washington had a warm place in his heart for as long as he lived.

As the years rolled on, young Washington, feeling more and more his limitations, was impelled to seek not only the betterment of his fortunes, but larger opportunities for education. With an indomitable will and energy as his only capital he went to Hampton, Virginia, which was then the Mecca of the ambitious colored youth of the dismantled South. He arrived with only fifty cents in his pocket. How well that small amount was invested only those who have followed his career can know. It was at Hampton, most likely, that the thought first formed in his mind that was to crystalize into the magnificent monument to his zeal and industry that is known as Tuskegee, Alabama.

Although Virginia was one of the great slave states, it is only fair to say that when she was dispossessed of her human real estate, within her boundaries was established one of the first schools for their training, an impetus already having been given agricultural and other industries by her well conducted plantations.

To many a southern slave-holder may be attributed the arousing of the spirit of progress in the hearts and heads of the slaves. The North gave the negro his freedom, but to the South he owes a debt of gratitude that through all the years has been accruing interest. No man so much as Booker Washington has done anything toward reducing the principal. Truly the bread cast for him upon the water is returning after many days. He left the Kanawha Valley a young inexperienced lad with a homemade cap upon his head. He returned crowned with the leaves of his own mountain laurel, the acknowledged leader of his race, with the eyes of the world upon him.

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THE WOMAN WHO TRAINED BOOKER WASHINGTON

by Ruth Rugby

Viola Knapp was a Vermont woman who went South to teach in the early Fifties. It was while engaged in this capacity in Louisville, Kentucky, that she became acquainted with General Lewis Ruffner, pioneer slave-owner in Virginia. She was employed as governess in the Ruffner home and afterward became the second wife of the General, wielding a power for good which was nowhere more telling in its effect than among the negroes who yet remained about the plantation.

Young Booker "Washington" as he had named himself, was given a place as house servant and was thus brought directly under the eye of the mistress. He was an apt pupil, but the lessons taught him were not all between the covers of a book. He learned to sweep and dust a room, and, as he relates in his book, "Up From Slavery," this was one of the tests for neatness when he applied for entrance to Hampton Institute at Hampton, Virginia.

Viola Knapp, by long residence in the South, had added to her practical Northern judgement the best qualities of the Southern woman and was as fine a specimen of womanhood as may be met within a century. During her life, Booker Washington never failed to visit her, and when opportunity offered never tired of praising her, speaking reverently of her many virtues, both in his public and private utterances.

To Viola Knapp Ruffner, he attributed much of his success. It was she who first awakened within him a thirst for knowledge, inspiring and encouraging his ambitions, teaching lessons of order, neatness and

high endeavor, by word, precept and example. Far reaching has been the influence of the noble Vermont woman who lived to see the results of her labor. Some people still remember when she came as Viola Knapp, in the flush of womanhood, to be governess in the Ruffner home, and afterwards its Northern mistress.

One can imagine what it meant to this Yankee girl to go into the heart of a slave state whose people and customs were so at variance with her own. She was an exotic, a Christmas rose, transplanted from the cold, puritanical atmosphere of New England to the warm, enervating air of the South, yet instead of languishing she at once adapted herself to the place and its people. Of strong constitution, fine character and striking personality, she gave forth a power which imparted its momentum to even the poor negroes who yet remained upon her husband's estate.

Booker Washington was the ready medium for the transmission of much of the force which expended itself for the betterment not only of his own people, but the world.

THE END