

The Shadow of Years

THE most disquieting sign of my mounting years is a certain garrulity about myself, quite foreign to my young days. I find a growing tendency to fix innocent listeners with my stern eye, despite their all too evident longing to escape, and to tell them what life has meant to me. In this case I have been most easily persuaded that Crisis readers are more than anxious to know about me, simply because I am having a birthday. *Selah!*

I was born by a golden river and in the shadow of two great hills, five years after the Emancipation Proclamation. The house was quaint, with clap-boards running up and down, neatly trimmed, and there were five rooms, a tiny porch, a rosy front yard, and unbelievably delicious strawberries in the rear. A South Carolinian owned all this -tall, thin, and black, with golden earrings, and given to religious trances. My own people were poor. I never remember being cold or hungry, but I do remember that shoes and coal and flour caused mother moments of anxious thought in winter; a new suit was an event.

We were part of a great clan. Full two hundred years before Tom Burghardt had come through the western pass to the Hudson with his Dutch captor, "Coenraet Borghghardt," sullen in his slavery and achieving his freedom by volunteering for the Revolution at a time of sudden alarm. His wife was a little black Bantu woman who never became reconciled to this strange land; she clasped her knees and rocked and crooned:

*"Do bana coba -gene me, gene me!
Ben d'nuli, ben d'le --"*

Tom died about 1787, but of him came many sons and one, Jack, who helped in The War of 1812. Of Jack and his wife, Violet, was born a mighty family, splendidly named: Harlow and Ira, Cloe, Lucinda, Maria and Othello! I dimly remember my grandfather, Othello, or Uncle "Tallow," -a brown man, strong-voiced and redolent with tobacco, who sat stiffly in a great high chair because his hip was broken. He was probably a bit lazy and given to wassail. At any rate, grandmother had a shrewish tongue and often berated him. This grandmother was Sarah - "Aunt Sally" -a stern, tall, Dutch-African woman, beak-nosed but beautiful-eyed and golden skinned. Ten or more children were theirs, of whom the youngest was Mary, my mother.

Mother was dark shining bronze, with a tiny ripple in her black hair; black-eyed, with a heavy, kind face. She gave one the impression of infinite patience, but a curious determination was concealed in her softness. The family were small farmers on Egremont Plain, in Sheffield, and else-where, going out now and then to work as "help." At about the time of my birth economic pressure was transmuting the family generally from farmers to "hired" help. Some revolted and migrated west-ward. Some went city-ward as cooks and barbers. Mother worked some years in service at Great Barrington, and after a disappointed love episode with a cousin, who went to California, she met and married Alfred DuBois and went to live by the golden river where I was born.

Alfred, my father, must have seemed a splendid vision in that little valley under the shelter of those mighty hills. He was small and beautiful of face and feature, just tinted with the sun, his curly hair chiefly revealing his kinship to Africa. In nature he was a dreamer, romantic, indolent, kind, unreliable. He had in him the making of a poet, an adventurer, or a Beloved Vagabond, according to the life that closed round him. His father, Alexander DuBois, cloaked,

under a stern austere demeanor, a passionate revolt against the world. He, too, was small, but squarish. I remember him as I saw him first in his home in New Bedford -white hair, close-cropped; a seamed, hard face, but high in tone, with a grey eye that could twinkle or glare.

Long years before him Louis XIV drove two Huguenot cousins, Jacques and Pierre, into wild Ulster County, N. Y. One of them in the third or fourth generation had a descendant, Dr. James DuBois, a gay,

rich bachelor who made his money in the Bahamas where he and the Gilberts had plantations. There he took a beautiful little mulatto slave as his mistress and two sons were born: Alexander in 1803, and John later. They were fine, straight, clean-eyed boys, white enough to "pass." He brought them to America and put Alexander in the celebrated Cheshire School in Connecticut. Here he often visited him, but one last time fell dead. He left no will, and his relations made short shrift of these sons. They gathered in the property, apprenticed grandfather to a shoemaker; then dropped him.

Grandfather took his bitter dose like a thoroughbred. Wild as was his inner revolt against this treatment, he uttered no word against the thieves and made no plea. He tried his fortunes here and in Hayti; he became eventually chief steward on the New York and New Haven boats, and later a small merchant in Springfield. Always he held his head high, took no insults, made few friends. He was not a "Negro," he was a man! Yet when the white Episcopalians of Trinity Parish, New Haven, showed plainly that they did not want him or his folk, he led the revolt which resulted in St. Luke's Parish, and was for years its senior warden. Beneath his sternness was a very human man. Slyly he wrote poetry. He loved much and married three wives, but he was hard and unsympathetic with his children. Some of them and their children are now "white," but his oldest son quarrelled and ran away from home and married my brown mother.

So, with some circumstance, having finally gotten myself born, with a flood of Negro blood, a strain of French, a bit of Dutch, and thank God! no "Anglo-Saxon," I come to the days of my childhood.

They were very happy. Early we moved back to grandfather's home; I barely remember its stone fireplace, big kitchen, and delightful wood-shed. Then this house passed to other branches of the clan and we moved to rented quarters in town; to one delectable place "up stairs," with a wide yard full of shrubbery, and a brook; to another house abutting a railroad, with infinite interests; and, finally, back to the quiet street on which I was born -down a long lane and in a homely, cozy cottage, with a living room, a tiny sitting room, a pantry, and two attic bed rooms. Here mother and I lived until she died in 1884; for father early began his restless wandering. I last remember urgent letters for us to come to New Milford where he had started a barber shop. Later he became a preacher. But mother no longer trusted his dreams and he soon faded out of our lives into silence.

From the age of five until I was sixteen I went to school on the same grounds -down a lane, into a widened yard, with a big choke-cherry tree and two buildings, wood and brick. Here I got acquainted with my world and soon had my criterions of judgment. Wealth had no particular lure. We had in town no very rich, but many "well-to-do" folk. As playmate of the children I saw the homes of nearly all, except a few immigrant New Yorkers of whom none of us approved. The homes I saw impressed me but did not overwhelm me. Many were bigger than mine, with newer and shinier things, but they did not seem to differ in kind. I think I probably

surprised my hosts more than they me, for I was easily at home and perfectly happy and they looked to me just like ordinary people, while my brown face and frizzled hair must have seemed strange to them.

Yet, I was very much one of them. I was a center and sometimes the leader of the town gang of boys. We were noisy but never very bad, and, indeed, my mother's quiet influence came in here, as I realize now. She did not try to make me perfect. To her I was already perfect. She simply warned me of a few things, especially saloons. In my town the saloon was the open door to hell. The best families had their drunkards and the worst had little else.

Very gradually I began to feel myself a part from my play fellows, with a special work, a special race. The realization came slowly -although at times there were sudden revelations. Curious enough, however, I always felt myself the superior, not the inferior, and any advantages which they had were, I was sure, quite accidental. I had only to mobilize my dreams -then they would see!

I was graduated from the high school at sixteen. It was my first open triumph.

I talked on "Wendell Phillips," and all my town applauded with my mother. It was her great day, and after it she soon turned her face to the wall and slept. I was long in realizing my loss. That came many years after. Now it was the feel of wings. I was going beyond the hills, into the world which beckoned steadily.

There came a little pause. I wanted to go to Harvard, but white friends said I should go South, and they promised a scholarship. Very well, I was eager to see my people. They were yet strangers to me. So I embraced the opportunity, quite forgetting the curious irony by which I was not regarded as a real citizen of my birth town, with a future and a career, and went to a far land, among strangers who were regarded as (and in truth were) "mine own people."

As I peer back through the shadow of my years, seeing not too clearly, but through the thickening veil of wish and after-thought, I seem to view my life divided into four distinct parts: the Age of Miracles, the Days of Disillusion, the Discipline of Work and Play, the Second Miracle Age.

The Age of Miracles began with Fisk and ended with Germany. I seemed to ride in conquering might. I was captain of my soul and master of Fate. I *willed* to do! It was. I *wished* and the wish came true. I suspect that beneath this triumph there were many failures and disappointments, but the realities loomed so large that they swept away even the memory of other dreams and wishes. Consider for a moment how miraculous it all was to a boy of seventeen, just escaped from a narrow valley: I willed, and lo! my people came dancing about me -riotous in color, gay in laughter, full of sympathy, need, and pleading; unbelievably beautiful girls -"colored" girls - sat beside me and actually talked to me while I gazed in tongue-tied silence, or babbled in boastful dreams. Boys with my own experiences wrought out with me great remedies. I studied eagerly under thoughtful teachers, and new worlds opened before me.

I willed, and lo! I was walking beneath the elms of Harvard -the name of allurements, the college of my youngest, wildest visions; I needed money: scholarships and prizes fell into my lap; commencement came, and standing before Governor, President, and grave, gowned men, I told them certain astonishing truths, waving my arms and breathing fast. They applauded rapturously, and I walked home on great pink clouds of glory. I asked for a fellowship -and got

it. I announced my plan of studying in Germany, and when the Slater Board excused itself, I went at them hammer and tongs. Ex-President Hayes, their chairman, smiled as he surrendered.

I crossed the ocean in a trance; I saw London and Paris, Rome and Florence, Vienna and Berlin; I walked in valleys and climbed mountains; for the first time in my life I met real, human souls, face to face, and made friends. Distinctions of race and color faded. I felt myself just a man, not merely a "colored" man. I builded great castles in Spain, and lived therein. I dreamed and loved and wandered and sang; then I dropped suddenly back into "nigger"-hating America.

My Days of Disillusion were not disappointing enough to embitter me. I was still upheld by that fund of infinite faith, although dimly about me I saw the shadow of disaster. I began to realize how much of what I had called Will and Ability was sheer luck. *Suppose* my good mother had preferred a steady income from my child labor, rather than bank on the precarious dividend of my higher training? *Suppose* that pompous old village Judge, whose dignity we often ruffled and whose apples we stole, had had his way and sent me while a child to "reform" school to learn a "trade"? *Suppose* Principal Hosmer had been born with no faith in "darkeys," and instead of giving me Greek and Latin had taught me carpentry and the making of tin pans? *Suppose* I had missed a Harvard scholarship? *Suppose* the Slater Board had had then, as now, distinct ideas as to where education of Negroes should stop? *Suppose and suppose!* As I sat down calmly on flat earth and looked at my life, a certain great Fear seized me. Was I the masterful captain, or the pawn of laughing sprites? I raise my hat to myself when I remember that even with these thoughts I did not hesitate or waver, but just went doggedly to work; and therein lay whatever salvation I have achieved.

First came the task of earning a living.

I was not nice or hard to please. I just got down on my knees and begged for work, anything and anywhere. I wrote to Hampton, Tuskegee, and a dozen other places. The trustees of a backwoods Tennessee town considered me, but were afraid. Then, suddenly, Wilberforce offered to let me teach Latin and Greek at \$750 a year. I was overjoyed! When offers from Tuskegee and Jefferson City followed, I refused; I was so thankful for that first offer.

I went to Wilberforce with high ideals. I wanted to help to build a great university. I was willing, seriously willing, to work night as well as day. I taught Latin, Greek, English, and German. I helped in the discipline, took part in the social life, and begged to be allowed to lecture on sociology; and began to write books. But I found myself against a stone-wall. Nothing stirred before my impatient pounding. Or if it stirred, it soon slept again.

For the first time in my life I realized that there were limits to my will to do. The day of miracles was past, and a long, grey road of dogged work lay ahead. I had, in a sense, won, but could I remake Wilberforce? No. So I determined to leave Wilberforce and try elsewhere. Thus, the third period of my life began.

First, in 1896, I married -a slip of a girl, beautifully dark-eyed and thorough and good as a German housewife. Then I accepted a job to make a study of Negroes in Philadelphia for the University of Pennsylvania -one year at six hundred dollars. How did I dare these two things? I do not know. Yet they spelled salvation. To remain at Wilberforce without doing my ideals meant spiritual death. Both I and my wife were homeless. I dared a home and a temporary job.

But it was a different daring from the days of my first youth. I was ready to admit that the best of men might fail. I meant still to be captain of my soul, but I realized that even captains are not omnipotent in unchartered and angry seas.

I essayed a thorough piece of work in Philadelphia. I labored morning, noon, and night. Nobody ever reads that fat volume on "The Philadelphia Negro," but they treat it with respect, and that consoles me. The colored people of Philadelphia received me with no open arms. They had a natural dislike to being studied like a strange species. I met for the first time those curious cross currents and inner social whirlings of my own group. It set me to groping. I concluded that I did not know so much as I might about my own people, and when President Bumstead invited me to Atlanta University, the next year, to teach sociology and study the American Negro, I accepted gladly at a salary of twelve hundred dollars.

My real life work was done at Atlanta for thirteen years, from my twenty-ninth to my forty-second birthday. They were years of great spiritual upturning, of the making and unmaking of ideals, of hard work and hard play. Here I found myself. I lost most of my mannerisms. I became more broadly human, made my closest and most holy friendships, and studied human beings.

I became widely acquainted with the real condition of my people. I realized the terrific odds which faced them. From captious criticism I changed to cold science; then to hot, indignant defense. I saw the race hatred of the whites, naked and unashamed. I held back more hardly each day the mounting indignation against injustice and misrepresentation. I faced with streaming eyes the awful paradox of death and birth -in fine, I emerged a man, scarred, partially disillusioned, and yet, grim with determination.

At last, forbear and waver as I would, I faced the great Decision. My life's last and greatest door stood ajar. What with all my dreaming was I going to *do* in this fierce fight? Against all my natural reticence and hatred of forwardness, contrary to my dream of racial unity and my deep desire to serve and follow and think, rather than to lead and inspire and decide, I found myself suddenly the leader of a great wing of my people, fighting against another and greater wing. I hated the rôle. For the first time I faced criticism and *cared*. Every ideal and habit of my life was cruelly misjudged. I, who had always over-striven to give credit for good work, who had never consciously stooped to envy, was accused by honest colored people of every sort of small and petty jealousy; and white people said I was ashamed

of my race and wanted to be white! I realized the real tragedy of life. The captivity of my soul was linked to the bloody and bowed head. Yet, there was no pomp of sacrifice, no place for appeal for sympathy. We simply had doggedly to insist, explain, fight and fight again until, at last, slowly, grudgingly we saw the world turn slightly to listen. My Age of Miracles returned again!

My cause grew, and with it I was pushed into a larger field. I felt more and more that Atlanta must stand well with philanthropists, while my larger duty was to speak clearly and forcefully for my people, despite powers and principalities. I was invited to come to New York and take charge of one part of a new organization. I came in 1910. It was an experiment. My salary even for a year was not assured, and I gave up a life position. I insisted on starting *The Crisis* as the main part of my work and this, after hesitation, was approved. *The Crisis* succeeded, and here I am on my fiftieth birthday.

Last year, I looked death in the face and found its lineaments not unkind. But it was not my time. Yet, in nature sometime soon and in the fullness of days, I shall die; quietly, I trust, with my face turned South and Eastward; and dreaming or dreamless, I shall, I am sure, enjoy death as I have enjoyed life.