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# Self-Made Men

by Eugene V. Debs

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The term “self-made men” is seemingly paradoxical — since men who rise from obscurity to eminence in any of the walks of life, must have been assisted by agencies quite independent of themselves — and yet, men are properly styled self-made who without parents or friends to discover those inherent qualities of mind which achieve success, hew out their pathways to distinction self-directed.

It has been truly said, that American institutions are preeminently favorable for the development of the mind forces of the masses of the people; that to use a phrase, somewhat slangish, those who start out in life under unfavorable conditions may get “on top,” if they have the required amount of “sand,” that is to say, courage, pertinacity, diligence, and that superiority of soul which patiently endures privation; that clear vision, which sees victory from afar, and that tenacity of purpose which defies obstacles, and steadily marches towards the goal of success. In such regards, there is no country on the face of the earth that offers equal opportunities to those which distinguish the United States of America — nor, indeed, approximates them. Such facts, whatever may be said of them by those born rich, are of the greatest possible significance to that vast majority who were born poor.

The subject, self-made men, at once presents temptations for discursive writing. It brings into view the declaration of a self-evident truth that men in the United States of America, whatever may be said of other lands, are created equal, that is to say, birth establishes no prerogative for one class, that is not equally the right of all other classes, among which, and all of which, are the rights to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” It may be true, and from certain indications there are reasons for believing the statement, that opportunities for aspiring youth to overcome the disadvantages which poverty creates are not as numerous now as in the earlier days of the republic,

and that, as a result, self-made men are less frequently heard of in public affairs. We doubt if such conclusions are well founded. On the contrary, we think, if the facts could be ascertained, the conclusion would be that self-made men are rapidly multiplying, though it may be true that there are fewer of the type in positions to attract the public gaze — the reason being that self-made men are making themselves along lines of endeavor other than political distinction.

It has been justly said that the largest share of the mind forces of the country is no longer attracted by the glare and glamor of political preferment. Indeed, it is asserted that the most brilliant intellects are not found in what is called the “learned professions.” If this is true of men whose youth was favored with opportunities for education and powerful friends, wealth and its influences, it is reasonable that youths less favorably situated, as they unaided solve problems and advance, will also in a great majority of cases seek their welfare by identifying themselves with the great industrial enterprises of the period, and this is really what is happening.

It is true, that our legislatures and congresses, courts and bars, are overrun with *half*-made men. The people, strange to say, tolerate these *misfits* for a time and then discard them, and as a result, there are judges without bench or ermine, lawyers without clients, legislators without a constituency. If we proceed with the investigation of dead failures, we find clergymen without pulpits and doctors without patients — and these exhibitions of failures are fruitful of determinations on the part of many a brainy youth who has his fortune to make, by virtue of pluck and perseverance not to accept elegant pauperism and decayed dignity as examples, but to make himself useful by mastering some trade, and with such equipment, await events, ready and qualified at all times for promotion, and here it should be said, that the term “self-made” invariably implies success.

We read from time to time of railroad men who have advanced from indigence and obscurity to positions of responsibility, and it is noteworthy that in every instance they are self-made men, students from the start — students of men, of things, of books, of everything pertaining to their chosen calling — indomitable and indefatigable, they were always engaged in the *self-making* business. Such men — and it is a misfortune that their biographies are not printed — are splendid examples to all youths who must make themselves, must rise by their own will power, or remain forever at the bottom of the ladder.

The biographical history of the United States abounds with the names of illustrious men who struggled up from conditions of extreme poverty, a poverty which triumphantly demonstrates the possibility of success when there is will power and an unyielding purpose to advance, regardless of obstacles.

It is doubtless true that the most illustrious self-made man the United States has produced, was Abraham Lincoln. The advancement of this youth from squalor and illiteracy to the summit of fame to brighten as the centuries go by, reads like fiction — and yet, every incident in the life of the great citizen from youth, bears irrefutable testimony that where there is a will, there is a way to “sound all the depths and shoals of honor” and win victories all along the line. Poor, friendless, illiterate, required to toil as a mere farm hand or a flat-boatman, he read, thought, toiled and advanced — in everything a self-made man.

Henry Wilson, of Massachusetts, was another splendid type of a self-made man — in some regards, perhaps, more pronounced than Abraham Lincoln. The son of a farm laborer in bleak New Hampshire, from childhood till he was of age, one year at school was the limit of opportunities in that direction. Apprenticed to a farmer at ten years of age, he remained until he was twenty-one, but though his school days were few, he managed to read a thousand books during the period of his bondage. Quitting the farm, he learned the shoemaker’s trade, and by frugality saved enough from his wages to enable him to add to his limited learning, and thus aided in overcoming the disadvantages of poverty, he steadily advanced to political positions till he reached the Vice Presidential office of his country. Henry Wilson, the “Natic cobbler,” the poor boy and self-made man, represented the state of Massachusetts in the United States Senate and placed his name beside those of the most distinguished sons of that old commonwealth, and at no period of his career was Massachusetts required to blush for his words or acts.

If the Adamses, Websters, Everetts, and Choates had borne high advanced the banner of the old Bay state in the arena of learning and statesmanship, Henry Wilson, the self-made man, never lowered it the fraction of an inch.

Andrew Johnson, the North Carolina youth, was, if possible, poorer than Henry Wilson — and in his boyhood and early manhood was more unfavorably situated for advancement. Scarcely knowing his alphabet when of age, simply a tailor, with an aged mother to sup-

port, he cut and stitched and pressed, and studied, and in a state surrounded by an aristocracy of wealth and refinement, he became Governor of Tennessee, a United States Senator and President of the United States.

We could fill the pages of the *Magazine* for a twelve-month with the achievements of self-made men, who, in every department of human endeavor, have won success and renown, but the instances briefly referred to must suffice. If these awaken no aspirations on the part of the readers of the *Magazine* who find themselves in positions not dissimilar to Lincoln, Webster and Johnson, then it were folly to extend the list.

We desire, however, to deduce from such incidents practical lessons for locomotive firemen of our Brotherhood. They enter the service of railroads, hoping at least to become engineers. Thousands of them succeed — some reach higher positions. There are thousands of firemen who will never become engineers, simply because they do not desire promotion. They are ignorant and prefer to remain so. They complain of their hard fate, but are everlastingly attributing their failures to the wrong cause. They are not students of anything. Ask them to undergo an examination, and to write out the answers to questions, and they will decline because they cannot *spell*. They will expend dollars for beer and whisky, but never ten cents to purchase a dictionary or a grammar. Ask them to solve a simple problem in arithmetic, and their ignorance will compel them to decline the task. This illiteracy, stupidity, lack of ambition, forever keeps them at the bottom. They see others advance, and instead of emulating their example, they prefer pool to school, and choose to hammer coal and shovel it into a fire-box rather than employ their leisure in learning what they must know if they expect to rise.

What is the remedy? We know of but one. There is but one — and that is to resolve upon a change of habits — renounce follies and vices, obtain elementary books and study. All self-made men have done this in the past, and men who are *making* themselves are doing it now, and will continue to do it as long as the world stands.

*Edited by Tim Davenport*

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