

The Olympian

An American Triumph

Craig Williams

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To Andrea Cristina Williams
&
Alexa Sophia Williams

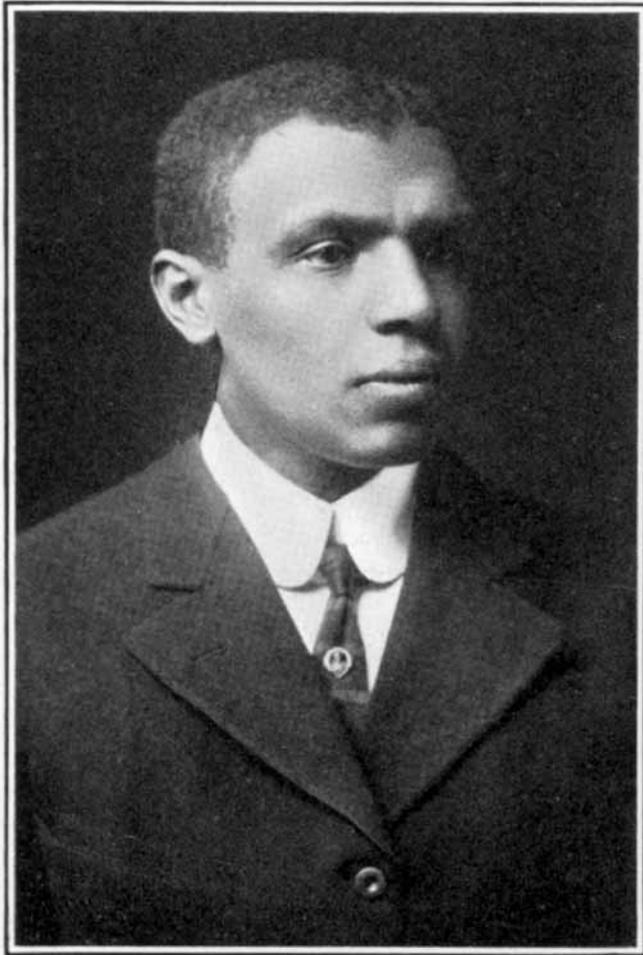
There is in this world no such force as the force of a person determined to rise. The human soul cannot be permanently chained.

—W. E. B. Dubois

Contents

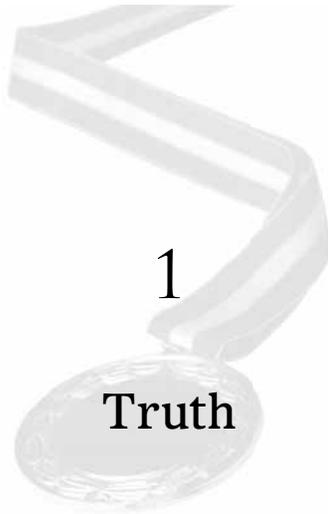
1. Truth	1
2. Glory Days	7
3. Celebration	25
4. Nobody's Hero	29
5. Stammered	36
6. The Inquisition	43
7. Friendship	52
8. Forever	58
9. The Gift	65
10. "Please Pass the Chocolate"	70
11. Higher Learning	73
12. Anchor	78
13. Fatal Blow	82
14. Farewell	85
15. Brotherhood	91
16. Shakespeare	99
17. Cheater	106
18. The Wall	111
19. A Grown Man	118
20. Church Folk	133
21. Misery	138
22. Fighter	146
23. If I Could Do One Thing	161
24. Calling	165
25. A Fine Gentleman ...	174
26. An Open Call on Hearts	182

27. Olympian	186
28. Graduation	193
29. Magic	197
30. Olympic Games	204
31. Homecoming	230
32. “A Life Well-Lived”	234
33. Glory	238
34. Afterword from the Author	242



John Baxter Taylor Jr.

(Courtesy of the University of Pennsylvania Archive)



April 1905
University of Pennsylvania
Philadelphia

I took a deep breath before opening the door to the dean's office. His secretary glanced up, then back down at her paper as if the door had opened by itself and I was not standing there.

After several moments of silence, she finally said, "Yes?" in a martyr's sigh.

"I'm here to see Dean Adams," I said.

"Do you have an appointment?" She never allowed her eyes to touch mine.

"Well, no, but it's an urgent matter."

She sighed. "What could be so urgent that you've entered the office of the dean without an appointment?"

"I'm John Taylor. Professor Ryan sent me here for a conference with Dean Adams. He said the dean would be expecting me."

"Well, you should have said that first thing, Mr. Taylor. Dean Adams has been waiting for you."

In another time and place the strange conversation would have made me laugh. But this was not the time or place for laughter.

"I suppose he is," I said with as much sarcasm as I dared allow. "May I enter?"

"Certainly." She dismissed me with a wave of her hand and turned back to her work.

I entered the inner office to find Dean Adams seated behind his desk, his chair turned away from the door so he could gaze out the window. The light of the morning sun fell across the sill and gleamed on his balding head.

He heard me enter but did not turn from the window. "Yes?"

"Dean Adams, I'm John Taylor, and I have been sent here to discuss a pressing matter with you."

"It appears you have violated our honor code, Taylor," he said roughly, leaning closer to the window. He was paying more attention to the potted plant in the sill than to the man losing his senses just behind him.

"I have done no such thing." I pulled a chair away from his desk and sat down before my legs gave out.

He turned slightly in my direction. "Well, then, how do you suppose you and one of your classmates wrote the same opening for a term paper?"

What? I wanted to laugh. "That's not possible," I said aloud.

He made a sound that might have been a chuckle. "Are you saying you and Charles Cook worked on your papers independently and yet share the same opening statement?"

Charles Cook? The Charles Cook I knew would never write a congratulatory essay about a colored boxer. The idea was absurd.

"No, sir. I am saying I wrote my own paper ... all of it. Every word. Jack Johnson is one of *my* heroes. Can you imagine that he's also one of Charles Cook's?"

He disregarded this and continued as if I had not uttered a sound.

"The University of Pennsylvania takes its honor code very seriously." He turned fully to me at last, leaning forward in his chair. It creaked, and even *that* sound seemed accusing.

"Yes, sir, I understand," I murmured. "I take it just as seriously, I assure you."

He sat back, his chair tilting toward the window—and away from me. His pale gaze was steady and cold. “We will conduct an investigation into this matter.”

I felt a swift surge of relief. Good, then the truth would be revealed.

“We can begin with you taking responsibility, giving Charles Cook and your good professor an apology.”

The words seemed to float in the air before my face. What sort of investigation began with an assumption of guilt and an apology?

“I will do no such thing,” I said.

His eyes widened. “You do understand you can be expelled for this violation?”

“Sir, with all due respect, if I were guilty, I *would* take that very seriously. But I assure you, I am innocent of these charges. I have never cheated in my life. You can’t be telling me that Charles Cook wrote a paper about the boxer Jack Johnson.”

He lifted some papers from his desk and studied them as if the resolution of the matter were contained on those sheets. He shook his head from side to side, the papers whispering accusingly between his fingers. “Charles Cook wrote a paper about boxing, the first page of which I have here. It is all but identical to yours.” He paused to look up at me. “An apology is required.”

Defeat rose up to burn my throat. I pushed it back down—I could not give in to this. “I will not apologize. Have you read his entire paper?”

“I have read enough to know that the openings are too similar to have been written independently.”

“And you assume *I* was the one who cheated.”

When he said nothing in return, I rose from my chair and stood there for a moment, looking down at him in disbelief, wrestling to keep my anger on simmer. When I didn’t leave, he spoke again, without looking at me.

“This matter is under investigation . . . and you are suspended until further review.”

“But sir!” I protested.

“You will receive a request for a committee meeting in the mail,” he said dismissively, returning his attention to another stack of papers on his desk.

“Please hear me out!”

His gaze leapt from his desk to collide with mine so forcefully that I instinctively backed away. “Exit the door by which you entered,” he said stiffly, “or I will have you removed.”

“Yes, sir,” I whispered.

I walked out past the secretary, who suddenly seemed to notice me. She shook her head as if she, too, had judged me and found me guilty. This time I paid her no mind and strode from the dean’s office with as much dignity as I could muster.

* * *

The impact of the day’s events had affected my body. My shoulders slumped as I trembled with outrage and disappointment. I had done everything in my power to live an uncommon life. I had used my athletic skills to make my place in the world and had spent late nights studying and preparing for class so that my exceptional work would at least be regarded as “good.” To have my hopes and dreams snatched away by a man such as Charles Cook—a man who already had the world at his feet—was beyond comprehension.

Where did I go from here? How did I explain to my parents that I had been accused of cheating? How did I look my dear Mary Agnes in the eye and tell her that the man she respected and loved had been labeled “dishonorable”? What would I say to my coach and teammates?

What could a man say when the virtue he had lived his life by was erased in a single day?

I mustered all the power in my body to make my way out of the administrative building without displaying my anger and despair. The faces of the other students were a blur to me; all I could see clearly was the flag waving in the wind over Franklin Field. I moved toward that familiar ground as if pulled by a magnet. I had to run. Running was my saving grace, a not-so-ordinary talent I possessed. There was a freedom in movement against the wind that could not be put into words. This was my sacred ritual and rite of passage.

Passing through a sea of students, I made my way across campus. As the track's ranks of bleachers came into view, my legs began to move on their own. I sprinted the rest of the way, weaving in and out of foot traffic and dodging the bustle of harried students, until I stood on the track at Franklin Field. There I finally stopped and allowed the magnitude of this unforeseen calamity to roll over me.

Thanking the good Lord that the field was empty at this hour, I dropped my duffel and ran, my street shoes' leather soles loud on the track's gritty surface.

I had experienced many victories on this track. In those moments I seemed to go beyond time and the limitations of an ordinary man. They were tiny windows I was privileged to peer through, but they afforded sweeping views of extraordinary scenes. And I knew I was extraordinary, too, or at least that my talent was. My coach at Central High had called me the Black Eagle, and though I'd never seen one in flight, I had a deep feeling that this bird and I had much in common.

I had an eight-foot, six-inch stride. Coach said that was the "longest stride known to man." Maybe so. What it meant to me was that my legs carried me with a certain grace, like the wings of that black eagle. We had that in common.

We both *flew*. More than that—we both understood flight and, I had thought, freedom.

I ran with abandon, pursuing freedom with every step. As I pressed myself to speeds only the eagle and I knew, the air made an amazing sound. It hissed with resentment because I challenged it. It whistled in pain because my body cut it like a knife. My legs pumped, my heart pulsed, my feet hammered the track—steady, rhythmic, insistent—like the constant hum of a Scott Joplin rag that you just don't want to end. I told myself that the water filling my eyes was from the wind.

No matter how fast I ran, I could not win the race against my thoughts. I could not escape this situation into which I had been thrust. I ran knowing that when I went home later, I would break my parents' hearts with a single word: *resignation*. The very word was a cage that put to lie the sense of freedom that running gave me. I was not free. Not really. Not when guilt could be assigned to me because of the color of my skin.

Oh, certainly I had the freedom to choose between fighting the injustice—thus bringing the accusation of cheating into the open—and simply going quietly away. And I had chosen. I had made the decision: I would voluntarily resign as a student of the University of Pennsylvania, preserving the life my parents had built at the cost of every dream they had ever dreamed on my behalf.

As galling as that was, I would not allow my family's future and fortunes to sit on the chopping block waiting for those in the "higher" court to either uphold a lie or override it with the truth. I'd seen how the lines had fallen—my professor and my dean had decided that Charles Cook was the truth and I was the lie. They had agreed between them that truth, like beauty, was in the eye of the beholder.

The Gospel of John says, "Then you shall know the truth and the truth will set you free." I had always believed that. Now I found that the Good Book did not say what happened when the truth could not be known. I had discovered that this day for myself. This day I was trapped inside a lie, its bars rising out of the ground to cage the eagle and stop its flight.

I staggered to a stop. Even in running there was no release from this cage. I picked up my duffel and started for home.