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JOHN M. SIDDALL, *Editor*

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April, 1920

A Genius Who Never Walked a Step

The extraordinary story of Charles Lee Cook—a Louisville invalid, who, against great odds, has achieved wonders

By B. C. Forbes

A CRIPPLE who has never been able to walk a step in his life, and who was taken from school when seven years of age, recently refused a forty-thousand-dollar-a-year job.

Some of America's proudest warships could not hold their heads quite so high had this same cripple not been called into counsel to assist in solving a problem which set up a certain danger of boiler explosion by oil working through the condensers. He evolved a device that eliminated this trouble and made it possible for these ships to be equipped with automatic lubricating devices for the engines.

The tenants of palatial apartments in New York, Chicago, and other cities owe some of their luxurious comforts to the genius of this unschooled cripple. During the war, he invented one machine which enabled a solitary unskilled workman to accomplish as much work as had been done by thirty skilled mechanics.

That outlines only one side of his accomplishments. At an examination not so long ago he displayed a vocabulary of over 37,000 words, and gave distinctive definitions to over 15,000 synonyms, a feat believed to be beyond the power of all but perhaps half-a-dozen living Americans.

He can describe from memory the careers of the five hundred most famous figures which have appeared on the world's stage since the dawn of history, and can describe the conditions under which the people lived during the times of each of these leaders. The classics he has at his tongue's end.

Although he never entered an art school, he has developed surprising ability as a painter; this, too, notwithstanding that he has only the most limited use of his hands, and is unable to lift or hold anything weighing more than a few ounces.

Becoming interested in law, he attended law school when thirty-six years of age,

appointment to the United States Senate as successor to the late Ollie James.

He has lately designed and built a miniature steamer of a type which it is believed will restore to the Ohio and Mississippi rivers their old-time glory as channels of traffic; his description of the old-time steamboat and exposition of his

new model drew the admiration of the Inland Waterway Commission when last year it summoned the cripple to give its members the benefit of his vast knowledge of river transportation and engineering.

Architects proclaim that his vision and technic in architecture is remarkable. Among other things, he designed and built at Brunswick, Georgia, the most wonderful creosoting works this or any other nation has ever known.

So many-sided is his genius, so catholic his sympathies, so deep his understanding of human nature, that his friends and correspondents embrace leading financiers, industrial and commercial masters, members of Congress, members of the judiciary, ministers, agnostics, artists, doctors, stars of the stage, anarchists, monarchists, loafers, beggars and convicts.

He demonstrates in a practical way his interest in humanity by giving away fully one fifth of his generous income every year.

All this he has achieved in the face of nothing but discouragement by his parents, who mistakenly thought that the almost entire lack of use of his muscles fatally incapacitated him for any work. Indeed, they did not imagine for a moment that he would live to manhood. Little

How We Heard About Mr. Cook

A FEW months ago Mr. Forbes wrote for THE AMERICAN MAGAZINE an article presenting the story and ideas of Percy H. Johnston, recently chosen president of the Chemical National Bank of New York. Mr. Johnston is thirty-nine years old, and one of the most remarkable of the younger business giants.

When Mr. Forbes was preparing that article Mr. Johnston said to him, "Why do you bother with me as a subject for an article? I am well and strong, and ought to make good. Why don't you get a real story? Why don't you go to Louisville and get the facts about Charles Lee Cook—an invalid who can't walk a step, yet a man who has done marvels in business. I have known him for years. My acquaintance with him extends back to the days when I lived in Louisville. Get Cook's story. You will be amazed."

Here is Cook's story. Read how the man overcame his difficulties. THE EDITOR.

and lawyers who knew him then declare that had he chosen the legal profession he would unquestionably have fitted himself for the United States Supreme Court Bench.

Such distinction has he won as an authority on public questions and as a student of politics that the governor of Kentucky seriously considered him for

did they know the strength of his will, the caliber of his brain, the indomitableness of his ambition.

"Adversity," he says, "is a spur. What may seem the harshness of Providence is often just what is needed to make a man fit to face the steel of existence. It is true of men, as it is of nations, that they thrive and wax strong on hardship, and that they wane on ease and self-satisfaction."

Don't imagine for a moment that the gods have laid all these gifts and talents and accomplishments into his lap without exertion on his part. For twelve years he toiled in absolute obscurity in his father's stable *an average of seventeen hours a day* at a lathe of his own design and construction, turning out a product of his own invention which, though it netted him only five dollars a week during all these years, was destined to earn him in later years both fame and fortune, and to place his product in nearly every great engineering construction marvel of the present century.

Although without sufficient power in his muscles to enable him to move without aid at any stage of his life, he has kept everlastingly at it, seated in a "buggy" of his own construction, with a zeal and application equaling that of Edison. Once, when called upon to undertake an exceptionally difficult task of great urgency and importance, he worked continuously from Sunday midnight to Friday night without sleep. Nor is it uncommon for him to work two whole rounds of the clock without stopping to eat. Although the record of his achievements suggests the possession of an Aladdin's lamp, an analysis of his career reveals that he had to pay a full hundred cents on the dollar for everything he has attained.

CHARLES LEE COOK, of Louisville, Kentucky, the remarkable subject of this article, was a normal child, as were his brother and sister. He developed more than usual strength until about one year old, when stagnation of muscular development began to appear. Although he never walked, he was a handsome and physically perfect child, apart from this failure in muscular development.

When fourteen, a slight curvature of the spine set in, because the muscles of the body had not sufficiently developed to sustain its weight. This is Mr. Cook's only deformity, and though he is now forty-nine, his body is as elastic as that of a child, with every function normal, and all the senses highly developed.

His eyesight has been proved by examination to be stronger than that of a young man. His ability to measure things by the eye has become, through constant practice, almost miraculous. He has likewise an extraordinary eye for color, being able even in lamplight to work out delicate color distinctions—he is usually so busily engrossed in other things during the day that his painting is done at night.

When four years old he was wheeled to and from school; but, although he showed unusual aptitude for learning, his schooling was terminated before he was seven, solely because his parents felt certain that he would never live to reap the benefit of a proper education.

His father, who lived in Louisville, had been a principal constructor of the Louis-

ville Canal for the United States Government, and had also converted old river steamers into gunboats for the North during the Civil War. The little cripple early manifested mechanical ingenuity. From the time he was six years old he made all his own toys, as well as mechanical playthings for the other members of his family and numbers of little friends. When only eight, he built a steam engine which actually worked, notwithstanding that the materials within his reach were most scanty and crude: the cylinder was made of a 32-caliber cartridge shell, the boiler of a half-pound baking-powder can, the flue in the boiler was in part a kerosene lamp burner, and steam was generated by this means. At twelve he aroused some local attention by constructing a miniature duplicate of the famous Mississippi River towboat "Ajax." This model was twenty inches long, ran by steam and towed tiny barges made from cigar boxes.

His next and more ambitious achievement was the successful building of a steam fire engine which contained over one thousand pieces. Although only eight inches high and seven pounds in weight, it could throw a stream of water more than fifty feet! Yet his only materials for this wonderful machine were old pieces of a French harp, lamp burners, steel hairpins, knitting needles, and brass tubing taken from an old gas jet. His only tools were two files, a hammer, a saw, and a watchmaker's die. Numerous visitors, including jewelers and expert mechanics, declared that the workmanship in it equaled that of the finest Swiss watch.

Notwithstanding these exhibitions of phenomenal talent, his parents extended to him no encouragement whatsoever. They looked upon his activities as purely childish, harmless enough, but not capable of development into usefulness. He was left alone to "amuse himself" in the little workshop he had rigged up in the family stable. In the evenings he watched the other children doing their home work, and tried to pick up as much education as he could under the circumstances, but without brilliant results. His heart was in mechanics rather than in schoolbooks.

One day, as he sat watching a railroad cut being excavated, he noticed that with each stroke of the piston on the powerful engine some steam escaped from the steam chest. The crippled youth had made friends with the engineer, just as he had made friends with a great many other men connected with mechanics, and he asked why this steam was allowed to escape. The engineer replied that nobody had been able to find any method of preventing this waste for any length of time.

"I'll solve that problem," he said to himself. And he did.

HE FINALLY got his device perfected, and it was placed on a Louisville and Nashville locomotive, where it ran one hundred and seventy-five thousand miles without repair. As an example of his grit and faith in himself, while developing his packing he would watch its performance all night on a switch engine. Once he had his attendant take him to the railroad roundhouse at night, where he waited until all but a friendly watchman and night hostler had gone and then, without anybody's permission, he disconnected the rod and slipped his packing on a loco-

tive at two or three o'clock A. M. The engineer ran this locomotive for days without knowing the packing had been changed. This boy so skillfully did these things that no accident ever resulted to the engine. Eventually these things were found out, but a good-natured master-mechanic paid him for his packing, and ordered some for other engines.

In this crude way he formed the basis of the business he now conducts in Louisville under the name of the C. Lee Cook Manufacturing Company. His experimenting took the form of a new invention, the first of a long line to Mr. Cook's credit. What he devised was a novel kind of metallic packing. He managed to purchase a little engine lathe, and then designed and built a four-horse-power engine and boiler to run it. Here, in his father's stable, he ran this machine, turning out its unique product, and kept at it year after year with no help whatsoever except that given him by his colored attendant.

IT TOOK him twelve years, working an average of seventeen hours a day, to emerge from the stable and establish a modest factory, which was destined to play an important part in the carrying out of some of the greatest construction and engineering achievements in America. His product is known throughout the world. During the war his packing was used on many Emergency Fleet Corporation ships, just as it is constantly used in the greatest steel plants of America.

Incidentally, another of his contributions to the war was the building of lathes for France for turning monster shells; and so perfect was his product that the French informed him that for once they hadn't a single complaint to make—an unusual experience in dealing with foreign manufacturers of war materials.

Some idea of the difficulties he encountered in perfecting and operating his invention can be gathered from the fact that his hands were too weak to hold the tools. What he could not accomplish with his hands, however, he set himself to accomplish with his brains. He rigged up a novel mechanical contraption which enabled him, with a minimum of physical effort, to hold the material on the lathe to trim it.

"I succeeded in overcoming all these difficulties, just as I have succeeded in overcoming other difficulties since, by not only being always willing to work harder than most people but by seeking always to distinguish between trifles and big things," he declares. "One difference between the man who succeeds in a large way and the man who does not succeed is that the latter concerns himself with matters of small importance, while the successful man concentrates upon the things that count most. If you turn your whole energies toward achieving something worth while, and refuse to be discouraged by repeated failures, the chances are that in time your combination of brain power and active work will enable you to win out.

"Success cannot be defined; it can only be described. It is not a brilliant scene; it is power, working for good, just doing the right thing strongly, and always, while doing it, gathering more strength to do it more strongly. It means that we have got to be fair with the world, and it does

not mean that we must pause every time we do a thing well, or think we do it well, to listen for echoes of the world going wild with applause about it. It simply means that we have got to give more than we receive. The big sustaining spirit of my business is that for every dollar I ask I am striving with all my might to send out in advance a dollar and a half in service.

"Of all failures on the face of the earth it is the human leech that, earning nothing, feeds and feeds upon the energies of the world, until by fatty degeneration of riches, his hold breaks, and he dies without a worthy neighbor to mourn his loss.

"It is madness to maintain that men should not have the right to acquire wealth. Wealth in individual hands is a wonderful blessing to the world when rightly used. We can no more hope to sustain aspiration, without some motive of gain and power, than we can presume to sustain life without food. But every means that attains this eminence ought to square with service-giving endeavors of responsible citizenship. Discouraged people who yet have their lives before them ought to study these ideals, instead of kicking and wailing about the failure of the world to give them a square deal. They ought then to get to work, work, work.

"SHORT hours and specialized attention to one thing will do very well for the man who is satisfied to be a nameless unit in the game of life. But no man ever reached heights above the average who kept himself busy looking at the clock.

"I have always sought to cultivate an optimism that turns the disappointments of one day into opportunities of another. To gain any high end or aim, it is usually necessary for man to become something of an idealist and indulge in dreams. But unless ideals and dreams and visions are zealously pursued, so as to transform them into practical realities, they amount to little. In a word, dreaming that is not accompanied by doing is of scant service to mankind.

"If I have been able to gather a moderate amount of knowledge of a larger variety of subjects than the average person, it is because I have been ready to expend the necessary exertion. I have always scorned to accept sympathy over being a cripple. I have inflexibly adhered to the rule that I would accept no favor and negotiate no business with any person whose intention was to give it to me out of pity for my physical misfortune.

"There must be a genuine service, or an honest endeavor to render a service, for every emolument life receives; and any person of sane mind, whether physically sound or defective, must give full measure for anything and everything received. Sometimes it has been embarrassing to me

and to other people when I felt compelled to refuse business because I sensed that the motive of the other party sprang from sympathy. My uncompromising stand on this point has sometimes caused me much hardship, yet never once have I been tempted to deviate from the course which I knew to be absolutely right."

What caused Mr. Cook to broaden his search for knowledge beyond strictly mechanical matters was a humiliating experi-

15,000 synonyms and antonyms. He built up a wide knowledge of roots and original meanings and derivatives, and even learned to trace many words into Greek, Latin, Hebrew and Sanskrit. Today he is an authority on the history of languages.

The seemingly impossible has always challenged Lee Cook to prodigious effort. The demand for his products became so widespread that he was compelled to tackle the problem of designing and building an addition to cover and completely surround the smaller building. This feat he accomplished without disturbing the operation of over thirty machines in the small building, notwithstanding that numbers of them stood in the way of piers and foundations. By a system of inexpensive braces and arches, parts of the new building were carried until it was completed, the old building dismantled and the machines, one by one, removed to new positions.



CHARLES LEE COOK

A Louisville cripple, whose remarkable story is told in these pages

ence he underwent at the age of twenty-four. His mastery of mechanics and metals had become sufficiently well known locally to bring him an invitation to give an address on the future possibilities of steel. Although his paper contained predictions which have since been proved to have been amazingly accurate prophecies, and although its facts and theories made an impression upon those qualified to judge, the speaker noticed more than once a disrespectful titter among the audience.

Afterward he asked a friend who had heard the essay, a high-school teacher, what was the cause of the ridicule. This friend, tactfully but frankly, told Mr. Cook that the essay was ungrammatical, and was badly composed, and that someone should have gone over it and rewritten it before it was delivered. Deeply mortified, Mr. Cook promised that he would never again be guilty of such an offense.

Immediately he began a severe study of grammar and rhetoric, of the history and the vocabulary of the English language, of etymology and every other subject bearing upon speech. His labors included the compilation of distinctions between over

AGAIN, his construction of the most modern efficient creosoting plant in the United States brought him much fame in the industrial world. The site was a swamp which required over five hundred piles to make its foundation secure. It covered twenty acres, called for one hundred and sixty-five carloads of machinery and material, was equipped with over two miles of railroad track and switches, and entailed the installation of upward of fifty thousand valves and pipe joints for the connection and operation of steam and creosote pipes ranging from one-eighth to twenty inches in diameter. The plant was built in less than a year, Mr. Cook acting

as president and treasurer, engineer, architect, purchasing agent and business manager. In one week he dictated over five hundred reports, specifications and letters connected with the project. When tested, not more than ten joints out of all the thousands required the slightest resetting.

When the authorities took up the question of multiplying the traffic facilities of our great inland waterways in order to supplement the nation's inadequate railway facilities, Mr. Cook's interest and assistance were invited. He recalled having watched many a time a certain type of river steamer ply the Ohio when he was a boy. He hunted high and low for a photograph of such a boat, and finally discovered one in the possession of a veteran Kentuckian.

He first painted a picture of the boat steaming down the Ohio, and then set himself to building a working model of an ideal all-steel boat for river use, the main aim being, of course, to reduce the draft of the vessel to the lowest possible minimum so that it could be navigated during low water. With infinite pains he constructed his novel (Continued on page 235)

A Genius Who Never Walked a Step

(Continued from page 11)

ship according to scale. Although it will have 3,500 horse-power and a maximum speed of more than twenty miles per hour, with a capacity of 3,000 tons net burden, it will call for only seven feet of water when fully loaded. In addition to designing the engines, boilers, and other machinery, he has laid out all the cabin and art decorations. One mural decoration—on the dome of the auditorium, capable of seating five hundred people—will portray the history of travel from the pack camel of ancient Egypt down to the motor trucks and flying ships. This boat will be all steel from keel to pilot house. It will have its own motor freight and express delivery. There will be a hotel on the top deck for the accommodation of over one hundred guests, who may sojourn there from week to week without connection with the traffic quarters of the steamer. This boat will also have a device which will make possible the sterilizing of over three hundred rooms in less than an hour, if necessary.

His knowledge of art surprises every artist who meets him. Rembrandt's "Night Watch" has been reproduced in miniature by Mr. Cook so accurately that enlargements thrown on the screen show not one of the figures is as much as a quarter of an inch out of place or size. Constructing a tiny watch by hand would have been a small labor for Mr. Cook compared to the painting of this extraordinary picture.

IN 1912 Mr. Cook gave a dinner in Washington in honor of his friend Senator Bradley from Kentucky. More than half of the senators were present, a tribute said to be unique in Washington's annals. In 1916 the Senate invited Mr. Cook to sit on the floor of that chamber during a session. The Senate of the United States has placed in the Congressional Record one of his speeches.

"Self-pity is fatal to success," declares Mr. Cook. "Some of those who have started life with the worst handicaps have accomplished most. Robert Louis Stevenson gave the world some of his finest books while lying in bed nigh unto death with tuberculosis, so weak that he could not hold a pen. Michael Angelo was a chronic sufferer from fever. Milton, as everybody knows, was blind. John Bunyan wrote his monumental 'Pilgrim's Progress' in prison. And nearly all the men filling leading business positions in this country started life penniless, many of them with but the most meager of schooling and many without good health.

"Complaining, whining, railing against fate, will never get a man anywhere. The way to meet difficulties is to face them, and battle against them heroically. Faith and optimism, combined with incessant endeavor, will triumph over almost any hurdle in life.

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kinds are so plentiful and available to-day that any earnest, purposeful, plodding young man can attain riches of the mind. A rich mind and a meager pocket can constitute success and yield happiness, whereas a bumper pocket and a poverty-stricken mind neither represent true success nor yield genuine happiness.

"Laziness is perhaps the most common cause of failure to make any considerable headway in life. I often hear this very class of people saying, 'Well, if I were a cripple like that man, I believe I would commit suicide.' I can answer them with equal feeling and more conviction, that, if Providence had given me their strength and health and I had accomplished no more with it than they, there would not have been any doubt about my decision to follow their suggestion.

"Sir William Hamilton, the great Scottish metaphysician, never tired of quoting that magic aphorism: 'In this world there is nothing great but man. In man there is nothing great but mind.' Mankind would be hard pressed to disprove this. But could he disprove it, he would only prove himself to be a very common animal and with no ambition beyond a full feeding trough, a field in which to roam and satisfy his sensualities."

MR. COOK enjoys life. He is not a noted "first nighter" at the theatre but approves and often attends first-class drama. He also enjoys the vaudeville and goes to the movies. He travels anywhere and everywhere by train, by steamer, by automobile. He designed and built the wonderful "buggy" in which he is pushed around. This is no ordinary piece of mechanism. It is collapsible and so compact that his attendant can pick it up and carry it anywhere with ease. Also, if steps have to be climbed, the wheel base can be instantly lengthened and the steps negotiated without trouble. Charles M. Schwab called it, "the most artistic and beautiful piece of work of its kind he had ever seen." Mr. Cook so designed and constructed his automobile that his "buggy" can be pushed into it by his attendant.

He is so cheerful, so well-read, so fascinating a talker that his companionship is sought by persons of all degrees—except beggars. He never allows a beggar to get away from him without a lecture to induce him to quit being a loafer and a parasite. Mr. Cook being convinced that no joy can be derived from anything that has not been worthily earned.

Mr. Cook has received many flattering offers from various places, but he has preferred to remain at the head of the business he created, and to continue to enjoy freedom to accomplish the many things in which he is interested outside his factory. He holds that the end and aim of all business, of education, of science, of political activities, should be to produce the highest type of citizens. The life he now leads enables him, by example and by effort, to contribute in his own way to the progress of the Republic and its citizens.

After talking with Mr. Cook for even a brief period, the last thing you think of is that he is a cripple. His presence and association act as a mental tonic, a bracing inspiration.



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