

PUSH

“What sort of agent does J---- make?” inquired a friend of a Boston merchant.

“Good—not extra;” answered the merchant, adding, “his push makes him good; more tact would make him extra.” The merchant meant to say that push alone will do much for a man, but will do more for him when coupled with tact. He stated a very important truth that demands attention; for push, which is another phase of energy, or force of character, is indispensable in every pursuit of life.

Buxton said, near the close of his life: “The longer I live, the more I am certain that the great difference between men, between the feeble and the powerful, the great and the insignificant, is energy—invincible determination; a purpose once fixed and then death or victory. That quality will do anything that can be done in this world, and no talents, no circumstances, no opportunities, will make a two-legged creature a man without it.” This is putting it strongly, but the statement is substantially true.

Elihu Burritt, at sixteen years of age, was a poor, fatherless boy, apprenticed to a blacksmith. He was obliged to work at the forge twelve hours a day. In less than thirty years from that time he was known the world over as “the learned blacksmith.” How was it done? Without tremendous push it never could have been done. He possessed that “invincible determination” to know something, in spite of his surroundings; and so he pushed on, slowly but resolutely. When busy at the forge, he studied mathematics. He solved mathematical problems in his own head. His biographer furnishes the following specimen: “How many yards of cloth, three feet in width, cut into strips an inch wide, and allowing half an inch at the end for the lap, would it require to reach from the centre of the earth to the surface, and how much would it all cost at a shilling a yard?”

With several of these problems solved in his head, he would go home at night and report them to an older brother, who had worked his way through Williams College. His brother would go through the calculations on a slate, usually finding that Elihu was correct.

It was during his apprenticeship that he took up the study of Latin and Greek, carrying first his Latin grammar in his hat, and afterwards his Greek grammar, to study at odd moments. During the evenings of one winter, he read the Aeneid of Virgil and a part of Cicero. Often, at the forge, when he was waiting for his iron to heat, he would open his grammar and go through the conjugation of a Greek or Latin verb. At twenty-one, his apprenticeship completed, he went to his brother's school one term. Then he returned to the forge, working hard by day and studying hard by night. After laying by a little money, he resolved to spend a winter in New Haven, in study; not in college, but where he could breathe the literary atmosphere of that scholarly city. Without teacher or helpful friend, he began a course of study the next morning after his arrival. He took lodgings at a small tavern, where, at half-past four in the morning, as soon as the fire was built in the office, he studied German until breakfast, at half-past seven. After breakfast, when all the boarders had gone to their business, he studied Homer's "Iliad" until noon, with no assistance but his Greek dictionary. Just before the boarders came in to dinner, he laid aside his Greek and Latin, and took up Italian, thinking the latter would not attract the attention of the gaping crowd so much as the former. He returned to the study of Greek in the afternoon, but took up Spanish in the evening.

In this way he spent the winter; then, for a while, was a teacher. But his desire to become acquainted with Oriental languages was so great, that he finally resolved to visit foreign countries for that purpose. Not finding the necessary books in Connecticut, he concluded to visit the Orient to accomplish what he desired. Tying up his clothes in a handkerchief, he started for Boston, one hundred miles distant from New Britain, Connecticut, where he expected to find a vessel on which he could work his passage to a foreign port. But he found no such vessel. He learned, however, that there was an antiquarian society in Worcester, Massachusetts, with a library that contained the books he needed. Thither he hastened on foot, found the library in question, with all the advantages he was seeking. Immediately he secured a boarding place and work in a blacksmith's shop. The next morning he was early at the forge, and at night, to a late hour, was engaged in hard study.

For five years he continued these herculean labors in Worcester, without teachers, or even advisers, an illustration of push that is unparalleled, we believe, in American scholarship. He must have been surcharged with that “invincible determination” of which Buxton spoke.

It is no wonder that Edward Everett said, when speaking of him, “It is enough to make one who has good opportunities hang his head in shame.” Rather, we would say, let every aspiring youth in our land study this example, and be encouraged to face difficulties like heroes, and overcome them like conquerors.

Alexander ascended the throne at twenty, and conquered the world before he was thirty-three. Julius Caesar conquered three hundred nations, captured eight hundred cities, defeated three million men, and became a leading statesman and orator before middle life. But Burritt’s push was equal to theirs, and his achievements were greater and better for the world, since he taught coming generations of youth what force of character can do; and, as the leading champion of peace, made war appear horrible and unchristian to the civilized world.

“Gaining Favor with God and Man” by William Thayer, pp. 222-224