

TOM L. JOHNSON

I

THE TIME OF YOUTH

TOM LOFTIN JOHNSON, to give his full name, was born on July 18, 1854, at Blue Spring, Kentucky. He was a descendant of a distinguished Southern family. A few years after the birth of the boy, his father, Albert W. Johnson, established himself as a cotton planter in Arkansas. During the Civil War he served as a colonel in the Confederate army. His wife, with her three boys, Tom L., William L., and Albert L., followed his war fortunes, and when peace was declared they found themselves stranded at Staunton, Va. The war had devoured their plantation and all their other worldly possessions. Little Tom L., at that time

eleven years old, became the mainstay of his parents and brothers. Being befriended by a railway conductor he managed to obtain from him a monopoly on selling newspapers. No one but Tom was allowed by the man to carry papers on his train to Staunton. As there was a great demand for them, the boy had his own way in charging high prices, and he improved upon his opportunity. In a little over a month he was able to give his father \$88.00 in silver money. Col. Johnson was thereby enabled to take his family to Louisville, Ky., where friends enabled him to return to his plantation. Another failure must be recorded, followed by still more financial troubles and wanderings of the family from one place to another.

Of this period of Tom L. Johnson's life we have a record written by Mr. Louis F. Post, an editor, who was an intimate friend of his and possessed of his confidence. Mr. Post wrote among other things:

"Col. Johnson was extremely poor at this time. His family was deprived not only

of comforts, but of necessaries. They were so poor that when Mrs. Johnson determined to look for employment for Tom with a relative in Louisville, she was obliged to wait for a cold day to give her an excuse for wearing the crocheted hood of her more comfortable days. The intervening time had been utilised in providing for the education of the children. At Evansville, Indiana, Tom attended school for the first time. He received one full year's schooling there, and a few months' more while he lived upon his Uncle Jillson's farm. At Evansville he went through three grades, and what with this and the instruction he had received from his mother, he was about ready to enter high school when the family moved back to Kentucky. But his mother continued to tutor him, and in this she was assisted by his father, who, like his father before him, was skilful in mathematics and fond of astronomy. Tom cared nothing for literary studies. He was strongly inclined to neglect them altogether. But mathematics became easy to

him. Like both his grandfather and his father, his mind seemed to work almost instinctively in mathematical processes. In very great measure his power and his success are attributable to this aptitude, which he possesses in an exceptional degree."

It must not be surmised that the extreme poverty of the family dampened the ardor of little Tom, who was a lively boy and very apt to look at the bright side of things. Mr. Johnson in later days took pleasure in telling a little incident of his childhood days: He and one of his cousins played one day with a Noah's ark, when someone came into the room and accidentally knocked nearly all the animals over. The other child began to cry, but little Tom said, "Look here, some of them are still standing."

"Somehow or other," Mayor Tom added to this story, "I never felt like giving up a thing if there was a shadow of a chance to begin all over again."

In February, 1869, the boy began to work in a rolling mill in Louisville, where he re-

mained for four months. At the end of this time Biederman du Pont, a connection of the Johnsons by marriage, offered Tom a place in his street railway office in Louisville, Ky., and the offer was accepted. Thus Tom L. Johnson, in later years famous as a street railway magnate, entered upon the career in which he made a great fortune.

It was a small road, Tom was a small boy, only fifteen years old, but it did not take him long to learn. Toward the end of the year he was secretary of the company. He became also an inventor and constructed a new fare box, which was an improvement upon those in use. This invention netted him about \$30,000 and made it possible for him to buy a street railway of his own in Indianapolis. He had also a good friend in Mr. Biederman du Pont, who advanced him a large sum of money in addition to his own resources. Tom made his father president of the road, which he improved and made profitable, and ran it until he came to Cleveland in 1880, with a half million dollars in

his pocket, and still a greater sum of business experience and street railway knowledge in his head.

He had sold out his interest in the Indianapolis venture, because his friends and associates had lacked the courage to replace the mules then in use to move the cars by electricity. Not wishing to antagonise them he had looked for another field of activity.

Under the light of to-day there is no doubt that this move of his was not only best from a financial standpoint, but it developed in him all his great energy and intellectual faculties. Cleveland became in the course of time the battlefield of his life and finally his Waterloo.

From the very beginning of his career in Cleveland he encountered endless strife. At the time of his arrival he had to meet the antagonism of the roads already established. He was the man equal to the task, young, vigorous, full of experience and expediency. His opponents, of whom the late Senator Marcus A. Hanna was the most re-

doubtable one, had as little rest as Johnson. Mr. Johnson gave his opponents no peace. The chamber of the City Council and the court rooms were the sites of their contests. Hanna and his associates were bitterly opposed to Mr. Johnson's innovation of through lines and transfers. They preferred to take a second fare from a passenger who was obliged to use two different lines. The new man was successful in his enterprise, though Hanna bought a controlling interest in the company upon which Johnson directed his main attack. He fought their privileges, without being adverse to secure some for himself. Hanna, too, was a force like Johnson, but slower in his movements. He made a peace offer before going on the warpath, but the pipe of peace was declined. Tom L. Johnson had an advantage over his adversary, as he was on the more populous East Side of the river and could therefore develop his road under better conditions than Hanna, whose interests were in West Side lines. Johnson also succeeded in uniting

some of the other companies, forming the Cleveland Electric Railway Company, popularly known as the "Big Consolidated." He was now in control of some of the best lines in the city. Hanna, on his side, bought the cable lines, forming the Cleveland City Railway Company, then dubbed the "Little Consolidated."

The result of the long fight was advantageous to the people, as it ended in a material reduction of fares, Johnson justly figuring that this would induce people to make a more frequent use of the cars, and increase the income of his road. The other side never could comprehend these mathematics, but was forced to yield.

Peace between the two companies was not a genuine one, and as other interests claimed Mr. Johnson by this time, he finally sold his holdings in the Cleveland Electric Railway Company and left town. Some years later Hanna united his company with the "Big Consolidated," against which Johnson, later

on, having become Mayor of Cleveland, waged a war of unheard-of bitterness.

At the time Johnson retired from his Cleveland railway he had with his brother Albert acquired an interest in the Detroit street car system and also in that of Brooklyn, N. Y. He was soon engaged in the same kind of warfare as in Cleveland, but still found time to start large steel plants in Johnstown, Pa., and in Lorain, Ohio, and to make useful inventions in connection with the production of steel rails. His capacity for work knew no limits. In 1898, however, he withdrew more or less from the street car business, and soon afterward from the steel plants also. Things of another nature had taken possession of his mind and occupied part of his time.

His success as a business man was remarkable. From a boy on he showed a faculty for making money and was daring in his enterprises. Difficulties spurred him on to stronger action. He liked to measure his

strength with worthy adversaries, and delighted in debates with his business associates at the directors' table. Yet, strange as it may seem, this vivacious, smiling and well-liked street railroad magnate incurred the distrust of many of his friends in the business world. He had such a way of "putting things" that his word was not considered as good as his signature. This fact is significant and often, later on, influenced his public career.