

## EDWIN MILLER WHEELOCK: A PROPHET OF CIVIL WAR TIMES.

BY CHARLES KASSEL.

TO THE readers of the *Open Court* the name of Edwin Miller Wheelock is not wholly unknown. As early as 1908—less than ten years after the death of that obscure but highly gifted personality—excerpts from *Proteus* were published in the *Open Court*, accompanied by a remarkable photograph of its author; and a beautiful edition of the work complete came from the press of the Open Court Publishing Company in 1910, with an appreciative foreword by Dr. Paul Carus and a biographical note by the present writer. A fragment in the strain of *Proteus*, found in a manuscript sermon, was published in the September issue, 1920, of the *Open Court*, and the same issue of that magazine contained a more elaborate life-sketch by the writer of the present paper, condensed from an unpublished biography.

*Proteus* and its author were distinctly a discovery of Dr. Paul Carus. The work itself, in the form of a pamphlet privately printed, remained unnoticed until chance brought it to the attention of Dr. Carus, whose verdict upon its philosophy and rare poetic beauty was immediate and enthusiastic.

It was not only, however, as a philosopher and writer that the name of Edwin Miller Wheelock deserves a place in the annals of his time. He was a powerful and eloquent preacher as well, whose utterances in a great crisis of American history mark him as belonging to the true order of prophets.

In every age there are impressive and heroic figures who, long before the mass of men, seem by some mysterious faculty to sense the on-coming of events. These are the seers of humanity, and literature and history are full of their marvelous glimpses into the unlighted future. It is as a seer, whose place in the authentic line of his fellows has been fixed by events, that we deal in this paper with the author of *Proteus*.

The anti-slavery cause, to which our subject was bound by every instinct of his being, passed with the death of John Brown beyond the stage of academic discussion. It was now a great crusade with its own shining martyr, whose blood should serve as the seed of victory. It was the execution of John Brown, indeed, which offered the supreme challenge to the heart and intellect of our minister and evoked those impassioned and prophetic utterances which are and must forever remain unique in the history of the period.

By the law of the land the revolutionary is always a criminal. Under the statutes of England, Washington and his compatriots were rebels and outlaws. Such, likewise, according to the North, were the leaders of the Southern armies. The historian brushes aside these superficial considerations and looks upon historic movements in the light of their final destiny. In this light John Brown was a capital figure in American history. That truth the humblest of us now perceive. It was because Edwin Miller Wheelock perceived it *then*, and perceived it earlier and more clearly than the other thinkers of the time, that this essay becomes worthy of publication, embodying as it does, in the ensuing paragraphs, a quotation from the unpublished biography we have mentioned.

The second day of December, in the year 1859, was a day of awful moment in American History. On that day the edict was registered in the Book of Fate that the American nation should suffer the pangs of a gigantic revolution and that a great national sin should be purged away in a baptism of fire and blood—a baptism not brief but, on the contrary, bitterly prolonged that the agonizing ordeal might sear into the nation's memory and leave its impress forever.

The makers of the federal constitution, approaching the problem of confederating the victorious colonies into a cluster of states, snuffed danger in the institution of slavery but thought it best to avoid an issue with it rather than imperil the hope of union. It was a compromise with an institution clearly recognized as an evil but it was a compromise which would make possible the adoption of the Constitution by all the colonies and which would leave open the problem of chattel slavery for final solution in the future. Could the bloody sequel have been foreseen, that compromise would have been refused, and all plans for the consolidation of the colonies might have fallen.

There might still have been time in the early decades of the

federal union for a successful grapple with the evil, and the enduring interest of the nation dictated an unrelenting effort in this direction. The presence of human slavery in a nation peculiarly dedicated to liberty was a reproach. It gave the lie to all the fine professions of the Declaration of Independence. Everywhere, North and South, sensitive natures felt the stigma of the institution. More and more, however, the material interests of the people stilled the voice of conscience, and the hour of settlement, which the wisest men felt to be inevitable, was again and again postponed.

It was a mere accident of climate, perhaps, that gave slavery its chief foothold at the South, and about the South, as about Laocoon and his sons in the marble group, this serpentine institution wound itself with ever deadlier folds. Time was, even at the South, when every sober mind recognized in slavery a moral evil for which no practicable remedy seemed to present itself, but as events grew toward the catastrophe a moral numbness upon the subject spread itself over Southern minds.

The time had now passed for any peaceful settlement. In the procrastination of a quarter of a century the remission of this sin without the shedding of blood had become impossible. The fathers had hoped for an extinction of slavery and the removal of this single stain upon American good faith in the cause of liberty. But that hope was now gone. All that remained was to prevent its extension and to this end alone Northern statesmen devoted their energies.

Even that effort, however, was vain. It was an issue of arms and events waited for the man who could realize this truth and who could see that the lasting interest of North and South alike dictated the hastening of the contest that its conclusion might be speeded, and a new birth of freedom for the land assured while yet there was time. A little more folding of the hands in sleep and the hour, even for a warlike settlement, might pass and the country become wholly slave or be effectually broken up into a slave nation and a free.

The role of John Brown in that crisis springs from the fact that he clearly saw this truth and acted upon it. While all about him at the North were moving under a spell of fancied security, he sensed the hour of fate and knew that the appointed time was at hand. His bloody part on the side of freedom in Kansas during 1856—something which was not known or believed at the North until long after his death—can be understood only by remembering

that he thought of the war intuitively as on already, and it is only with this in mind that the exploit at Harper's Ferry becomes comprehensible. Success at Harper's Ferry was wishworthy from Brown's standpoint but even failure there and ultimate martyrdom would serve a supreme use.

The surprise and seizure of the arsenal at Harper's Ferry by John Brown and his handful of men occurred on October 16, 1859. It was the first step in a plot to free the slaves of Virginia. If successful, the raid was to be repeated on a larger scale elsewhere. The adventure was meant to be a bloodless one but this hope was as vain as the plot itself. John Brown had reckoned on the cooperation of the slaves, but the slaves were apathetic and held listlessly the weapons placed in their hands. This was a factor he had not counted on and it was the factor that made his whole plot absurd.

Within a short space of time the folly of the whole attempt was plain. Two of Brown's sons lay dead and the old man himself, wounded and bleeding, was a prisoner. His trial quickly followed and on December 2nd, 1859, the chief actor in the adventure was dangling from the gallows.

For awhile, it is plain, after the failure of the raid, Brown felt a deep sense of disappointment. All along he had felt that only by direct action could the national evil be done away—so much, indeed, that he held the Garrison abolitionists in contempt who only talked and would not fight. He had nursed the hope, however, that by force, yet without much bloodshed, the slaves in Virginia might be freed and thus slavery everywhere rendered so insecure that the masters would be content to give up the institution. He had believed, too, devoted to his Bible as he was, that in the crucial hour divine aid might come to him as divine aid had seemed to come in Kansas in his miraculous escapes from harm.

Now, however, as the days went by, a new light broke and the thought which had been dimly present at the outset spread itself over his whole mental horizon. It was the *failure* of the attempt, and not its success, that was divinely pre-destined. In the providential plan for a salvation of the nation while yet there was time a supreme sacrifice was needed and he had been chosen for the part.

The place of John Brown in history cannot be rightly assigned, perhaps, for another half century, but a study of the man and his life and thought suggests to the attentive mind the estimate we

have offered. The notion advanced at the time by Edwin Miller Wheelock was much the same. He believed the exploits of Brown and his death on the gallows marked the beginning of the end—a belief which the subsequent course of history amply justified. “John Brown,” he said in a sermon at Dover—we quote from Von Holst’s *Constitutional History of the United States*, Vol. 7, Page 54, note 1—“is the first plague launched by Jehovah at the head of this immense and embodied wickedness. The rest will follow and then cometh the end.”

The discourse at Dover referred to by Von Holst, and mentioned by Villard in the *Life of John Brown* among the typical sermons of the time, was originally delivered in the Unitarian Church at that place under the title of “Harper’s Ferry and its Lessons,” and excerpts from the discourse appeared in the *Liberator*, Vol. 29, Page 184. The utterance of the young minister, full of unwonted force and fire, attracted instant attention, and on November 27, 1859, it was re-delivered by its author at Theodore Parker’s Music Hall in Boston to an audience of three thousand listeners. In that edifice, where so often he had thrilled to the rich eloquence of Parker, it was now his privilege to stand and speak his message without stint or reserve.

The sermon was one which made a peculiar appeal to Theodore Parker himself, then ill in Italy. “He pasted in his journal,” says John White Chadwick in his life of Parker, “accounts of various John Brown meetings with the splendid Music Hall sermon of Edwin M. Wheelock.” To Joseph Lyman of Boston, Parker wrote on December 10th, as we learn from *St. Bernard and Other Papers* by Theodore Parker, edited by Charles W. Wendte, “how admirably our best men have behaved, Garrison, Emerson, Wendell Phillips—surpassing himself, noble man, and dropping all extravagance at just the time when even a plain statement seems excessive panegyric to an outsider. How well Wheelock spoke at the Music Hall.”

The John Brown sermon of our minister has survived as a pamphlet printed for circulation shortly after its delivery, and is a part of James Redpath’s *Echoes of Harper’s Ferry*. Of the pamphlet a copy of the second edition under the name of *Harper’s Ferry and Its Lessons*, and bearing the sub-title, “A Sermon for the Times preached at the Music Hall, Boston,” published by *The Fraternity* in 1859, is to be found in Astor Library in New York City, to which place it had been transferred from the Lennox Library as a part of the Ford collection of pamphlets, and a copy of the same

pamphlet appears in the Library of Congress at Washington. A copy of the first edition of the pamphlet is accessible in the Boston Library, bound up, curiously enough, with a number of early pamphlets in defense of the institution of slavery.

We learn from Redpath's preface to *Echoes of Harper's Ferry* that the addresses contained in the work had been revised by the respective authors at the editor's request, or were printed with their consent from properly corrected editions, and each address is followed by the autograph of its author. Among these utterances are two speeches of Emerson in behalf of Brown, the paper read by Henry D. Thoreau to the citizens of Concord, Massachusetts, on Sunday evening, October 30, 1859, a lecture of Wendell Phillips on "The Lesson of the Hour," delivered at Brooklyn, November 1, 1859, a sermon by George B. Cheever delivered November 24th, another of Henry Newhall on December 4th, a discourse of the same date by Moncure D. Conway, with a poem by William D. Howells entitled "Old Brown," breathing a spirit of admiration for Brown as a great hero and martyr. In addition to this the book contained the words of Lydia Maria Child, Edward Everett and Henry Ward Beecher.

It was in a goodly company that our young minister thus found himself, his own prominent in a galaxy of illustrious names, but his words were no mere echo of the words of his more distinguished fellows. There was a distinctly individual ring to every sentence. Indeed, the views of the differing speakers and writers displayed wide divergence in important respects. Emerson, Thoreau, Parker and many others whose words are preserved in this work voiced sentiments of appreciation for the spirit which inspired Brown's efforts, though disclaiming sympathy with the raid itself. Edward Everett and Henry Ward Beecher declined to utter words of praise—they referred to the invasion as a wild and criminal act. Beecher twitted the North with hypocrisy in censuring the South for its treatment of the negro, declaring that the negro in the North did not enjoy rights of citizenship, that white laborers declined to work with him and that on the whole he was not sure there was not more humanity toward the negro in the South, even under slavery, than in the North. Largely through natural causes, Beecher thought, slavery would ultimately disappear.

Our minister took no part in views such as those of Beecher and Everett. He shared with Emerson and Parker and Thoreau the view that Brown was a saint and martyr in a great cause, and

that his act, whatever its value, was the first gust of a coming storm through which, and through which alone, the iniquity of slavery could be done away. A touch of reserve is apparent in the words of Emerson and even in those of Thoreau—the merest hint of an impulse to “hedge” and to avoid broad generalizations as to the effect of the raid and the coming martyrdom of its chief figure upon the future of the institution of slavery. No such thought is linked with the clear, ringing, bell-like words of our fearless young preacher. There was a complete abandon to the rush and passion of his thought.

Could he have re-read his discourse with eyes opened by the experience of the ensuing ten years many of the harsh words would have been supplanted by kindlier ones, but it is much to be doubted whether in its essential aspects his thought would have changed. It was far the most wide-ranging of the utterances of the time and it is set off from all others by the fact that it dealt with the subject prophetically as though the war were already a realized event and no more was necessary than to justify it in the eyes of the North.

“And all men mused in their hearts of John whether he was the Christ or not.” Such was the significant text at the Music Hall that morning. The minister’s attitude toward the prisoner in Virginia was thus made plain at the outset.

“There are certain focal points of history around which all others cluster and revolve—Paul or Mars Hill, Luther nailing his thesis to the church door—Columbus on the quarter deck of the Santa Maria—Cromwell training his Ironsides—Joan of Arc in the flames—and such a focal point, marking a new era in American history, was the man and his deed at Harper’s Ferry. The bondman was standing at last face to face with his Moses.

“When there came to Pharaoh in the days of old the divine summons to let the Jewish people go, and the summons was unheeded, the Lord plagued Egypt. For more than half a century the spirit of God has, through religion, the conscience, the humane instincts, the heroic traditions of our land, been pleading with the American Pharaoh to let his people go. But in vain. Now the plagues are coming.”

In celebrating Bunker Hill, the minister insisted, the right to condemn Harper’s Ferry disappears, and he remonstrated with those friends of the slave who so earnestly deprecated and condemned that “war cloud no larger than a man’s hand” which had just broken over Virginia. Freedom through purely moral and

peaceful means was impossible. A true peace is indeed a blessing—a peace that comes from knowing God and loving God and doing the will of God—but slavery knows no peace and its most tranquil state is worse war than the worst insurrection. Such was the burden of the early portion of the sermon. He continued:

“The terrible logic of history teaches us that no such wrong was ever cleansed by rose-water, that evil is used by the Almighty to crowd out worse evils.

“The slave has not only the right to be free—it is his duty to be free. God help the slave to his freedom without shedding a drop of blood; but if that cannot be then upon the felon soul that thrusts itself between God’s image and the liberty to which God is ever calling him—upon him, I say rests the guilt of the fierce conflict that must follow.

“It is fashionable now to call John Brown a ‘crazy’ fanatic but history will do the head of John Brown the same ample justice that even his enemies do to his heart. Last year the word ‘insurrection’ affected even anti-slavery men with a shudder; next year it will be uttered in every Northern legislature as a thing of course. Pharaoh may sit on the throne but he sits trembling. To hush the clink of the dollar and the rustle of bank bills over the land, if only for an hour, that the still small voice of God’s justice may be heard—can our ‘sane’ reformers show a wealthier record? His scheme was no failure but a solemn success. Wherein he failed his foes have come to his aid. The greatness of their fears reveals the extent of his triumph. John Brown has not only taken Virginia and Governor Wise and his company but the whole slave faction, North and South. All his foes have turned abolition missionaries. They toil day and night to do his bidding and no President has so many servants as he. The best Sharpe’s rifle in all his band could scarcely throw a bullet a single mile, but in every corner of every township in thirty-three states the people are reading his living and inspired words—words filled with God’s own truth and power and so more deadly to despotism than hosts of armed men.

“Behold on what platform the insane rage and fear of his foes have lifted this anti-slavery veteran to the stars! Strangling John Brown will not stop the earthquake that has followed his shattering blow; or if it does science teaches us that when the earthquake stops the volcano begins.

“John Brown’s aim was to render slavery insecure and he has succeeded. He has forced the telegraph, the press, the bar room, the parlor, to repeat the dangerous story of the insurrection in every corner of the South. From Maryland to Florida, there is not a slave who does not have the idea of freedom quickened within him by the outbreak at Harper’s Ferry. Like the Druid stone which the united force of a hundred men could not move while a child’s finger, rightly applied, rocked it to its base, the dark system of outrage and

wrong which has stood for thirty years moveless against the political power of the North, against the warnings of an insulted Christianity and against the moral sentiment of the world, now rocks and trembles. As in the Swiss valleys, the first clash of arms brings down the avalanche.

"From the martyrdom of Brown dates a new era of the anti-slavery cause. To moral agitation will now be added physical. To argument, action. The dispensation of doctrine will be supplanted by the higher dispensation of acts. The appeal of the North will now be applied to the terrors as well as to the conscience of this great barbarism. Other devoted men will follow in the wake of Brown, but avoiding his errors, and will carry on to its full results the work he has begun.

"He a fanatic! He a madman! He a traitor! Yes, and the fanatics of this age are the star-crowned leaders of the next. And the madman of today are the heroes of tomorrow. This 'traitor' is the living American and carries the declaration of 1776 in his heart.

"I think the time is fast coming when you will be forced to do as he has done. A few years more will roll away, the avalanche comes down upon you all, and you will be compelled to take the very ground on which stands this high-souled and devoted man. The gallows from which he ascends into heaven will be in our politics what the cross is in our religion—the sign and symbol of supreme self-devotedness; and from this sacrificial blood the temporal salvation of four millions of our people yet shall spring.

"It takes a whole geological epoch to form the one precious drop we call the diamond; and a thousand years of Anglo-Saxon progress, every step of which has been from scaffold to scaffold and from stake to stake, have gone to the making of this shining soul. The Virginia scaffold is but the setting of the costly gem whose sparkle shall light up the faces of an uncounted army."

Reading the John Brown sermon of our minister with the history which so soon followed freighting our thought it is easy to slough away the phrases born from the excitement of the hour and view the utterance as a prophetic word spoken at a moment of crisis. He saw, as did a few other select spirits of the time, the tremendous bearing of the martyrdom of John Brown upon the struggle which was about to commence, and his intuitive mind read the event, not in the light of the past, but in the light of the future.