

THE PROPHEPIC FACULTY

A PAGE FROM THE LIFE OF EDWIN MILLER WHEELLOCK

BY CHARLES KASSEL

THE prophetic character which attaches to so many great names in sacred literature, and here and there in the secular history of mankind, carries a singular fascination even in this rigidly scientific age. We like to believe of a lofty intelligence that, in some fashion beyond our understanding, it is responsive to impressions which fall spent and unheeded upon a less sensitive mind, and that it achieves knowledge, not by labored reasoning, but by some sublime process of intuition. Even the charlatan who tells fortunes in these enlightened days, and preys on the informed and the ignorant alike, is only appealing to an interest which in every age reveals itself fresh and unwithered.

It would be too much to say that the seer, as distinguished from the scholar and the savant, is a purely mythical personage. A few years ago we knew enough of the mystery of mind, as we felt, to scout at any except the accustomed method of arriving at truth. In the newer light which falls upon the problem from modern research we see the danger of being too dogmatic. It may be, after all, that the strange insight into the workings of destiny, which finds so many memorials in the literatures of forgotten ages, is the legitimate function of a high order of mind.

Even among our humbler kindred of fin and fur and feather we are startled, now and then, by the working of rare powers and senses. As if to show that she has not exhausted her wizardry in the intellect of man, nature ever and again puts forth in the sub-human world some baffling example of her cunning. To call such things instinct is not to explain but only to give a name to what we do not understand. The curiosity of science seeks behind the term for the inward meaning of the phenomena. "It is almost

certain," says Professor J. Arthur Thomson, in his magnificent *Outline of Science*, published in 1922, "that instinct is on a line of evolution different from intelligence, and that it is nearer to the inborn inspiration of the calculating boy or the musical genius than to the plodding method of intelligent learning."

Such prodigies as the calculating boy and the musical genius are possibly anticipations of evolution in its higher reaches, as may be, indeed, the prophetic type of mind—fore-gleams of something in store for the race on a distant round of the endless spiral. Meanwhile, nature itself, even in the lowlier realms, gives hint of her boundless resources and seems to sport with man as she dangles before him the proof of almost magic faculties.

It is not always the statesman or historian who catches first the omen of a great convulsion. It is often the more sensitive nature of the secluded and contemplative scholar which feels the early tremors of the cataclysm. Before great seismic disturbances, as we read occasionally, flocks of sea-birds fly wildly inland, as if warned by an inner sense that disaster impends, and if war could be symbolized in nature by some huge, winged, preying thing, we should find bird and beast aware of its coming, possibly, long before man.

"Sooner or later," quotes Professor Thomson, from E. K. Robinson's *The Country Day by Day*, after a fine passage of his own upon that "aristocrat of the bird-world and terror of the skies," the peregrine falcon, "the day always comes in early autumn to birdland when the peewits, feeding in silent battalions together, and the gulls waiting impatiently to rob the peewits of their worms, suddenly arise and wheel in wild disorder to the horizon; when the clustered partridge coveys crouch like clods to earth, and flocks of small birds feeding in the open fling themselves like a shower of stones into the nearest hedge; when the blackbird issuing from cover turns before he has flown a yard and darts back again with a chatter of alarm; when save for the distant cawing of rooks perched on lookout trees, a parish apart, sudden perfect stillness holds the landscape. Then the peregrine falcon passes, smiting her way from horizon to horizon and spreading terror as she goes. Who gave the first warning of her coming it is hard to tell. Possibly it was a rook. But the marvel is that the majority of the birds, being young ones of the year, can never have seen a falcon before; yet they fling themselves wildly to right and to left long before the speck in the far skies reveals itself to human eyes as a bird of prey."

Whatever power it be which, in the new day as in the old, mankind calls, for want of a better term, the prophetic ken, that power, in high degree, was possessed by Edwin Miller Wheelock. In the September issue, 1920, of the *Open Court*, as in the February and July issues, 1922, and in the March, August and December issues, 1923, we took a sweeping glance at the writings and the career of the author of *Proteus*. We beheld his heroic stand with the crusaders for the abolition of slavery before that agitation had become popular at the North, and, as the execution of John Brown passed in review, we paused to contemplate the rare forevision which could read so clearly in the tragedy at Harper's Ferry the nearness and essential character of a great national crisis. This extraordinary discernment did not leave him with the coming of war. Standing in his pulpit at Dover, New Hampshire, where, a few years before, as a young man of twenty-eight, he had been ordained into the ministry of the Unitarian church, he interpreted, as from a watch-tower, the events rapidly passing.

On April 12, 1861, the South fired the shot at Fort Sumter which, like that of the embattled farmers at Concord, was "heard 'round the world." The war had commenced. The nation which had thrown its flag to the skies but a few decades before was now divided against itself.

It was inconceivable at the North that the secession movement could withstand a show of force. It was felt, as, indeed, the newspapers boasted, that the thunder of the tramping of an armed host would sober the Southern leaders into a sense of the wickedness and folly of fratricidal strife, but, at worst, it was said, early success was sure for the Union cause. That the South would protract the struggle for years instead of months, that the Northern armies, incapably or timidly commanded, would lose battle after battle and yield steadily before the brilliant genius of the Southern generals, no one foresaw.

Bull Run, the historians tell us, ended in a rout, and at Ball's Bluff, too, success came to the South, though the moral effect of these victories was offset somewhat by the achievements of Farragut at New Orleans and of Grant at Fort Donelson. The Peninsular Campaign upon which McClellan set out with a splendid army and the high hopes of his government ended by July in ignominious failure. Close upon the heels of this crushing disappointment followed the disaster of Pope in Virginia and the summer of 1862 went out

in a pall of gloom. Displacing McClellan in command of the Army of the Potomac, Burnside struck at Fredericksburg in December, 1862, and suffered a terrible defeat, while Hooker, succeeding Burnside, went down before Lee at Chancellorsville in May following. The North was without a general and was paying the price of its unreadiness in a sickening sacrifice of the flower of its youth.

"For a year," says James Ford Rhodes, in his history of the twenty-seven year period between 1850 and 1877, "the North suffered the bitterness of defeat. McClellan's failure on the Peninsula, Pope's defeat at the second battle of Bull Run, Burnside's disaster at Vicksburg, Hooker's overthrow at Chancellorsville, but slightly relieved by the partial victories at Antietam and Stone's River, were a succession of calamities," and he quotes the words of leading men at the North in token of the gloom that prevailed.

"Summer comes to dinner," set down Longfellow in his journal, September 14, 1862, "he is very gloomy and despondent and cries out every now and then, 'Poor country! poor, poor country!' So, Governor Morton wrote to Lincoln twenty-three days later, "another three months like the last and we are lost—lost." Again Phillips Brooks said on October 23, 1862, "things certainly are at their blackest now—a great deal blacker than when we ran from Bull Run. Then we all meant to be up again and doing it. Now we are beginning to ask whether we shall or not." Holmes wrote to Motley, December 17, 1862, "there is no question that this news has exercised a most depressing effect on all but the secession sympathizers." Richards remembers that "they were dark days—days when as Brooks and I met on the street corner, after some bloody reverse of our armies, he could only wring my hand and say, "is it not horrible," and pass on gloomily."

That hour of despondency saw the sentinel at Dover gazing undismayed, though with deep emotion, upon the struggle. The terrible strife he had foreseen was now in progress. The hands of the North and of the South were lifted high in battle. The prophecy of John Brown was a fearful reality.

In the sermons of that time, just as in those before the outbreak, there is no note of despair. Then, as before, the utterance is clear and full. Impatience appears because the North still palters with slavery and an evil fortune is foreseen for the Union armies as long as compromise with slavery is in the thought and on the lips of Northern leaders; but that the struggle is providential he makes no

question and of its outcome the prophetic young preacher holds no doubt.

“What we need now especially to feel is the ever-living activity of a Divine Worker in the affairs of men, of One who sees the end from the beginning and continually reshapes His work. If in the light of this great end we look upon the revolutions of nations we shall see enough to show us that every upturning of the kingdoms of the world have directly brought us a step nearer to the divine purpose.

“Through all periods of American history we can see the inevitable chain of events, tending link by link, under the guidance of a heavenly hand, towards a divine end, still in the future. Our freedom is only a partial one. With the democratic wheat the tares of despotism have been growing until now the harvest hour has come.

“I know well the stern sacrifices, the voiceless grief, the dark perils which this war is causing, but I know, too, that only through this means can the Union be rebuilt. Better that a whole generation should be cut off by the fire and sword of a civil war than that the republic should be dismembered and the last hope of humanity fail, for Heaven has bound up with the continuance of this union the highest hopes of mankind.

“On all sides we hear the deep-breathed vow that come what will the last experiment of liberty shall not be permitted to fail; that we will guard well those holy waters gushing out of the rock on which the pilgrims knelt and prayed. There is a shaking of statesmen and of states, a throbbing of telegraphic wires, a swaying to and fro of vast populations, a rushing of armed squadrons along every highway pouring towards the capitol and all to tread down that devouring flame.

“On this wild and mighty sea of strife that sweeps over the whole land, politics are tossed as fishing boats off Newfoundland when the stormwind of the equinox descends. All the other great interests are rocking. Yet there shall be no death of any vital force. Government, religion, liberty, free industry, all shall live and live a higher life for the struggles through which they are now passing.

“Only the slave-power shall die, struck by the bolt of God’s wrath; and when this dark cloud, that now stretches from Baltimore to the Rio Grande, shall roll away, it will leave us a truly

free and united nation, with four millions of our countrymen kneeling on their broken fetters and returning speechless thanks to God!"

One of the noblest of the war sermons is that of September, 1861, which lies before us in manuscript. It was evidently the first discourse after the summer vacation, and it seems the vacation had been an unusual one and that its occasion had been the ill-health of the minister, for he mentions "the long holiday" that had been "so freely and generously granted," and adverts to "the fresh strength and restored health" with which he was returning to his duties.

"I find the topic of my discourse made ready to my hand. The social crisis on which we have fallen is uppermost in every brain and heart. The guns of treason have, with deadly earnestness, dispelled the last hope of peaceful settlement and substituted the sombre realities of strife. For libraries we are forming arsenals; for books, bayonets. The tide of wealth that has cast up, during our era of prosperity, an alluvial soil of luxury and culture, is now rolling on to form a great ocean-dyke against the sea of treason and slavery. The more serene and genial discourse of literature dies away, as songbirds cease their music before a storm. The spirit of the camp inspires the school-boy and invades even the drawing-room. Conversation, dropping its levities, becomes sharp, serious and decisive. The hidden forces of character, concealed during the era of peace, are coming to the surface. Sham reputations burst like bubbles and legal subtleties and windy speech give place to vital forces.

"There is a divinity which has prepared this crisis and shaped it and ripened it. Plainly as if His voice thundered to us out of the heavens He summons us to this grappling with the sons of Belial. Liberty and religion and the future of America are involved in the conflict and are staked upon the issue.

"Our summer campaign has failed. The last two months have come laden with the tale of routs, reverses and sore defeats—reverses that yet have proved beneficial and defeats more gainful than victory. Many millions of eyes were sleepless through the awful night of Monday, July 22nd, after the first tidings came over the wires, but when the first terrible shock had passed by I believe the heart and resolve of all true and loyal men rose higher than before.

"The defeat of the National Army is working just the good that we needed. It has hushed the offensive bragging of the newspapers. It has shown our work in its terrible magnitude. It is making us realize what we have only declaimed, with stale holiday rhetoric, that this is our day of judgment and of trial. The overshadowing danger is drawing us together; it silences our little disputes, 'as a clap of thunder hushes the noise of a rookery.' Now every man must be a part of every other man and only one pulse beat through us all. A voice comes articulate out of the peril, saying 'Merge all smaller questions in the great one. Move with one step when you march. Keep in solid ranks when you stand.'

"It was only the trumpet blast of defeat that could summon us out of our drugged and sleepy prosperity and bring us to our feet and sift us in the winnowing breath of the Lord. The loss of Sumter hushed the cry of faction; the defeat of Manassus showed us the awful proportions of our work. Perhaps another great reverse will smite us before the manhood of the nation will rise supreme over life, over property, over ease, over pleasure, over everything, and move in serried numbers at the call of our country, our duty and our God.

"Our cause appeals to the holiest instincts of human nature. It summons all our faith in God and all our love of man. If God can only urge us on to higher ground by the sore blows of his discipline, by reverses and defeats, by the loss of leaders and of towns, we need not be dismayed. If a blacker cloud than any yet should break above us, and a heavier thunder-bolt fall, let us remember that He is scourging but not forsaking us, and that He is sure to bring his wheat out whole and clean from under the flails of his threshing floor and the swift winnowings of his resistless winds.

"It seems to be a law of providence that every people, like every person, must pass through a day of judgment, before they can attain a full salvation and a clear separation of the evil from the good. Dismiss the idea then that the politicians have raised this strife, or that some fine compromise, or balance of parties, might have prevented it. The politicians did not intend it. The nineteen millions who prayed that this cup might pass by did not intend it. Even the rebels did not mean war. They did not intend to draw down the thunder upon their heads with an earth-

quake trembling under their feet at the same time. They thought to carry their point by bluster and threats, as they had always done. But God has used the frenzy of these men for his own great purpose. He has brought the civilization of the continent face to face with its barbarism and said, "This or that must carry the day." It is the decisive conflict of the ages, which has been coming on for fifty years. The hour is not 'dark' except from the standpoint of atheism. To those who will see the finger of God and follow it, it is our day of redemption and glory in which it is a privilege to live—a day of transition from a lower to a higher plane of the people's life. Every tone of the swelling turbulence that fills our borders is freighted not with forebodings of despair and death but prophecies of the highest health, of kindling hope, of a grand, invincible national life.

"Times are upon us such as this generation has never witnessed. A Red Sea is to be crossed more deep and more perilous than God's Israel has ever crossed before. Suffering and disaster in some shape will come home to all of us and touch our nearest interests. We may possibly lose another great battle or more than one or even our capitol, but defeats will not hinder—they will only help us on. Out of every cloud our cause will break with a more conquering splendor. No matter what befalls, let this consciousness bear us up, that we are not acting under the pressure of accident, or out of our puny individualism, but that all the winds of God are blowing behind us and sweeping us on before His face. We are but the insects of the hour. God is revealing to us His serene and almighty justice and tells us, 'be consecrated to that; be baptized into it for life and for death.' Let us, then, think less of ourselves and of our losses and our sacrifices and more of our country and our duty and God's will."

It is impossible to read such words as these without a deep sense of the feeling which inspired them. In few of the utterances of that time is there such an exaltation of tone. He saw the fearful ordeal as a struggle between conflicting ideas. On the one side was the conception of liberty and democracy—on the other the oligarchical ideal. To him the upheaval represented the sequel and fulfillment of the Revolutionary War. In all the turmoil, in all the sorrow and suffering, he felt the hand of a power above man's, and his voice on every occasion echoes the thought.

“We belong to a race which has bought every luster of its greatness thus far with sweat and tears and blood, and which must again and again pay down more of that dear purchase money. God reigns and step by step as He moves through the ages carries the race with Him, and necessities are dark angels which drive the nations of the earth, now together and now apart, that a work higher than lies in their thought may be made manifest to them. This great affirmation has carried men hopefully and cheerfully through the darkest days. If we can receive it, it will rid us of that terrible anxiety which sees in every untoward sound the crack of doom. It will comfort us with the vision of Him who destroys that He may again create, and whose second creation is ever fairer than the first, though the night must come between.

“This year stands out as one of the great dates of American history. It closes the past and opens the future. New prospects are before us. We may have to labor and to suffer—for not in an hour are the crimes of seventy years to be washed out, not without sorrow and pain are guilty traditions and old complicities to be given up, but the hour of effort and of sacrifice is also the hour of deliverance.

“There are wars which do not mean anything, which are waged for conquest or vulgar glory. Not so here. This is not a contest of animal strength. It is a conflict of ideas. It has the health of a spiritual life in it, for Satan and God’s archangels stand face to face and foot to foot opposed. It is the grapple of the two eternal opposites of modern society. In this controversy the old issues are reproduced, old as human history—the Russian against the Greek, the Saxon against the Norseman, the Puritan against the Cavalier. It is a war of a few against the rights of many. Now, as in the days of the revolution, expostulation, reason, appeals to justice, pleadings for forbearance and peace, have all been tried and tried in vain. The strife has been thrust upon us. If we yield to its march we surrender our institutions; we undo all that was done by the heroes of our revolution; we put ashes on the heads of the aged; we transmit despair to the young; we blot out America from the map of nations.

“Those that go to this conflict should feel that in no fancied sense but in very truth they defend the Ark of the Covenant, carrying the banner of the Lord; that they march to scourge the defilers

of its holy things. The spirit of a long line of ancestors is sounding to us from every sacred battlefield from Marston Moor to Bunker Hill, and the same prize is at stake—liberty protected by law. Let us meet the issue in obedience to the call of God.”

There is a suggestion of the Hebrew prophet in all this. So true is the insight into the meaning of events, so deep the feeling of divine agency at the heart of the storm, so calm the confidence in the outcome despite the blackest prospects. The land had grievously sinned and the sin must be washed out with blood as in the days of old, but the fate of the nation is sure and nothing can defeat the ends of Providence. Again and again he gives words to this thought. Thus in December, 1861:

“When we consider the condition the country is in now, the gloom of fear that possesses the public mind, the fightings and contentions that call forth armies a million strong from their families and their peaceful industries into the fields of mutual slaughter, with trade and commerce suffering in all its departments, bank doors closed and counters deserted, ships worthless and mills standing still, workshops empty and forge-fires quenched, rich men troubled about the payment of protested paper and poor men for the support of wives and children, we are not to forget that all this has come upon us not for our injury but for our good.

“In the dawning of a deadly struggle between two great principles, when the unwonted smoke of battle hangs over the land and darkens the sky, when after years of peaceful growth our country is called to pass through the ordeal of fire with life and death staked on the issue; in such a time more than ever have we need to remember that our chastening comes not of the hate of the Lord but of his love.

“From the experiences of the present, we shall draw our strength for our future destiny. The fever can be borne, and when it passes away we shall not only recover our wonted health but the old humors that have vitiated the blood will pass off with it and the old sores—the sins of our nation and race—will be dried up and we shall have a better expansion, a more vigorous frame than if it had not occurred.”

Again, in January, 1862:

“Wars must come. In the present state of the world a nation can no more avoid them than can the individual soul avoid its

conflicts, temptations and strife. There never yet has been a people not tested and tempered by these fiery ordeals. The truth of God is mighty and it will prevail but not without a struggle. It can not move forward a single step or even hold its own without coming into collision with opposing forces.

"This war was inevitable. The evils in our body politic were such and so great that no milder remedy could be applied. Collision and war were needed to cleanse and temper and exalt the national character. Only the terrible fire of purgation which we are now undergoing could purify the metal from the dross.

"The feeling that should fill our hearts today is not the thought of future danger and certainly not weakness at the thought of the trial before us. Our prayer should be neither that the cup may pass untasted from our lips nor for vengeance upon those who force it upon us, but for patience, endurance and strength to be faithful to duty in this time of our country's need. The question is, shall republican liberty now become real on earth or must the human race take a backward step in the grand march of civilization? To us, to our young nation in all the pride of youth, this great problem has been given to solve. At last the final appeal is made to the sword. *It is the final appeal*; and there can be no true rest except in victory. We can not hope to keep at less price than our fathers paid the great blessing which they gave us, greater far than they ever conceived."

To the terrible earnestness of the young preacher these passages bear ample testimony. Even the handwriting of the old manuscript gives proof of his feeling. The pressure of the pen is firmer than was the wont in the more poetic sermons of the earlier and more placid years. Now and then, indeed, the stroke is jagged, as if an emotion peculiarly tense and strained were driving the hand. His all of thought and feeling, it is evident, was in the great struggle.