

WENDELL PHILLIPS

BY

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[FROM THE NEW-YORK NATION, BY THOMAS WENTWORTH HIGGINSON.]

WENDELL PHILLIPS, son of John and Sarah (Walley) Phillips, was born Nov. 29, 1811. Like so many eminent men in New England, he traced his line of descent to a Puritan clergyman; in this case, the Rev. George Phillips, first minister of Watertown, Mass. From that ancestor was descended, in the fifth generation, John Phillips, first mayor of Boston, elected in 1822, as a sort of compromise candidate between Harrison Gray Otis and Josiah Quincy, who equally divided public favor. John Phillips is credited by tradition with "a pliable disposition," which he clearly did not transmit to his son. He was a graduate of Harvard College in 1788, held various public offices, and was for many years "Town Advocate and Public Prosecutor," a function which certainly became, in a less official sense, hereditary in the family. He was a man of wealth and reputation; and he built for himself a large mansion, which is conspicuous in the early engravings of Boston, and is still standing at the lower corner of Beacon and Walnut Streets. There Wendell Phillips was born. He was placed by birth in the most favored worldly position; the whole Phillips family being rich and influential, at a time when social demar-

ations were more distinct than now. He was, however, brought up wisely, since John Phillips made this rule for his children: "Ask no man to do for you anything that you are not able and willing to do for yourself." Accordingly his son claimed, in later life, that there was hardly any kind of ordinary trade or manual labor used in New England at which he had not done many a day's work. He attended the Boston Latin School, entered Harvard College before he was sixteen, and was graduated (in 1831) before he was twenty, in the same class with Motley the historian. Both of them had personal beauty, elegance, and social position; and Mr. Phillips always readily testified that both of them had certain narrow prejudices, which he outgrew very soon, and Motley in the end.

It is rare for any striking career to have a dramatic beginning; but it may be truly said of Wendell Phillips, that his first recorded speech established his reputation as an orator, and determined the whole course of his life. Being graduated at the Cambridge Law School in 1834, he was admitted to the bar in the same year. In 1835 he witnessed the mobbing of Garrison; in 1836 joined the American Anti-slavery Society. In 1837 occurred the great excitement which raged in Congress around John Quincy Adams when he stood for the right of petition; and in November of that year Elijah P. Lovejoy was murdered at Alton, Ill., while defending his press from a pro-slavery mob. The Rev. Dr. Channing and others asked the use of Faneuil Hall for a meeting to express their indignation: the city authorities refused it; Dr. Channing then wrote an appeal to the citizens of Boston, and the authorities yielded to the demand. At the Faneuil-hall meeting Jonathan Phillips, a wealthy citizen and a second cousin of Wendell Phillips, presided; Dr. Channing

spoke, and then two young lawyers, Hallett and Hildard. James Trecothick Austin, Attorney-General of the State, then addressed the audience from the gallery; and his speech soon proved the meeting to be divided on the main question, with a bias toward the wrong side. He said that Lovejoy died as the fool dieth, and compared his murderers to the men who threw the tea into Boston Harbor. The audience broke into applause, and seemed ready to go with Austin; when Wendell Phillips came on the platform, amid opposition that scarcely allowed him to be heard. Almost at his first words, he took the meeting in his hands, and brought it back to its real object. "When I heard," he said, "the gentleman lay down principles which placed the murderers of Alton side by side with Otis and Hancock, with Quincy and Adams, I thought these pictured lips [pointing to their portraits] would have broken into voice to rebuke the recreant American, the slanderer of the dead." From that moment the tide was turned, the audience carried, the oratorical fame of Wendell Phillips secured, and his future career determined. From this time forward, and while slavery remained, he was first and chiefly an abolitionist; all other reforms were subordinate to this, and this was his life. To this he sacrificed his social position, his early friendships, his professional career. Possessing a sufficient independent income, he did not incur the added discomfort of poverty: but, being rich, he made himself, as it were, poor through life; reduced his personal wants to the lowest terms, earned all the money he could by lecturing, and gave away all that he could spare.

He was fortunate in wedding a wife in perfect sympathy with him, — Miss Ann T. Greene, — and, indeed, he always said that her influence first made him an abo-

litionist. A life-long invalid, rarely leaving her room, she had yet such indomitable courage, such keenness of wit, such insight into character, that she really divided with him the labors of his career. It is impossible for those who knew them both to think of him without her; it is sad to think of her without him. They lived on Essex Street, in a region almost deserted by residences and given over to shops; the house was plain and bare, without and within; they had no children; and, except during the brief period when their adopted daughter was with them, the home seemed almost homeless outside of the walls of Mrs. Phillips's apartment. There indeed — for her husband and her few intimates — peace and courage ruled, with joy and hilarity not seldom added. But for many years Mr. Phillips was absent a great deal from Boston, on his lecture tours, though these rarely extended far westward, or over very long routes. Both he and his wife regarded these lectures as an important mission; for, even if he only spoke on "The Lost Arts" or "Street Life in Europe," it gave him a personal hold upon each community he visited, and the next time, perhaps, an anti-slavery lecture would be demanded, or one on temperance or woman's rights. He always claimed this sort of preliminary influence, in particular, for his lecture on Daniel O'Connell, which secured for him a great following among our Irish fellow-citizens, at a time when they were bitterly arrayed against the anti-slavery movement.

Unlike his coadjutor Edmund Quincy, Wendell Phillips disavowed being a non-resistant. That scruple, as well as the alleged pro-slavery character of the Constitution, precluded most of the Garrisonian abolitionists from voting, or holding office; but Phillips was checked by his anti-slavery convictions alone. This fact made him, like Theodore Parker, a connecting link between

the non-resistants and the younger school of abolitionists who believed in physical opposition to the local encroachments, at least, of the slave-power. They formed various loosely-knit associations for this purpose, of which he was not a member; but he was ready with sympathy and money. In one of their efforts, the Burns rescue, he always regretted the mishap, which, for want of due explanation, threw him on the side of caution, where he did not belong. At the Faneuil-Hall meeting, which it was proposed to transfer bodily to Court Square, Theodore Parker was notified of the project, but misunderstood the signal; Wendell Phillips was never even notified, for want of time, and was very unjustly blamed afterwards. It is doubtful whether he was, in his very fibre, a man of action; but he never discouraged those who were such, nor had he the slightest objection to violating law where human freedom was at stake. A man of personal courage, he eminently was. In the intense and temporary revival of mob feeling in Boston, in the autumn and winter of 1860, when a John Brown meeting was broken up by the same class of "gentlemen of property and standing" who had mobbed Garrison, Wendell Phillips was the object of special hostility. He was then speaking every Sunday at the Music Hall, to Theodore Parker's congregation, and was each Sunday followed home by a mob, while personally defended by a self-appointed body-guard. On one occasion the demonstrations were so threatening that he was with difficulty persuaded to leave the hall by a side entrance; and was driven to his home, with a fast horse, by the same Dr. David Thayer who watched his dying bed. For several nights his house was guarded by a small body-guard of friends within, and by the police without. During all this time, there was something peculiarly striking and char-

acteristic in his demeanor. There was absolutely nothing of bull-dog combativeness; but a careless, buoyant, almost patrician air, as if nothing in the way of mob-violence were worth considering, and all threats of opponents were simply beneath contempt. He seemed like some English Jacobite nobleman on the scaffold, carelessly taking snuff, and kissing his hand to the crowd, before laying his head upon the block.

No other person than Garrison could be said to do much in the way of guiding the "Garrisonian" anti-slavery movement; and Wendell Phillips was thoroughly and absolutely loyal to his great chief, while slavery existed. In the details of the agitation, perhaps the leading organizers were two remarkable women, Maria Weston Chapman and Abby Kelley Foster. The function of Wendell Phillips was to supply the eloquence, but he was not wanting either in grasp of principles or interest in details. He thoroughly accepted the non-voting theory, and was ready not only to speak at any time, but to write, — which he found far harder, — in opposition to those abolitionists, like Lysander Spooner, who were always trying to prove the United-States Constitution an anti-slavery instrument. Mr. Phillips's "The Constitution a Pro-slavery Compact" (1844), though almost wholly a compilation from the Madison papers, was for many years a storehouse of argument for the disunion abolitionists; and it went through a series of editions.

In later life he often wrote letters to the newspapers, in which he did not always appear to advantage. But he did very little writing, on the whole: it always came hard to him, and he had, indeed, a theory that the same person could never succeed both in speaking and writing, because they required such different habits of mind. Even as to reports of his speeches, he was quite indif-

ferent; and it was rather hard to persuade him to interest himself in the volume of his "Speeches, Lectures, and Essays," which was prepared by James Redpath in 1863. That editor was a good deal censured at the time for retaining in these speeches the expressions of applause or disapprobation which had appeared in the original newspaper reports, and which the orator had erased. It is, however, fortunate that Mr. Redpath did this: it not only increases their value as memorials of the time, but it brings out that close contact and intercommunion with his audience which formed an inseparable part of the oratory of Wendell Phillips. The latter also published "The Constitution a Proslavery Compact" (1844), "Can Abolitionists vote or take Office?" (1845), "Review of Spooner's Constitutionality of Slavery" (1847), and other similar pamphlets. He moreover showed real literary power and an exquisite felicity in the delineation of character, through his memorial tributes to some of his friends; as, for instance, the philanthropist Mrs. Eliza Garnaut of Boston, whose only daughter (now Mrs. G. W. Smalley of London) he afterward adopted.

The keynote to the oratory of Wendell Phillips lay in this: that it was essentially conversational,—the conversational raised to its highest power. Perhaps no orator ever spoke with so little apparent effort, or began so entirely on the plane of his average hearers. It was as if he simply repeated, in a little louder tone, what he had just been saying to some familiar friend at his elbow. The effect was absolutely disarming. Those accustomed to spread-eagle eloquence felt perhaps a slight sense of disappointment. Could this quiet, easy, effortless man be Wendell Phillips? But he held them by his very quietness: it did not seem to have occurred to him, to doubt his power to hold them. The poise of his

manly figure, the easy grace of his attitude, the thrilling modulation of his perfectly trained voice, the dignity of his gesture, the keen penetration of his eye, all aided to keep his hearers in hand. The colloquialism was never relaxed, but it was familiarity without loss of keeping. When he said "isn't" and "wasn't," — or even, like an Englishman, dropped his g's, and said "bein'" and "doin'," — it did not seem inelegant: he might almost have been ungrammatical, and it would not have impaired the fine air of the man. Then, as the argument went on, the voice grew deeper, the action more animated, and the sentences would come in a long, sonorous swell, still easy and graceful, but powerful as the soft stretching of a tiger's paw. He could be terse as Carlyle, or his periods could be as prolonged and cumulative as those of Choate or Evarts: no matter; they carried, in either case, the same charm. He was surpassed by Garrison in grave moral logic; by Parker, in the grasp of facts, and in merciless sarcasm; by Sumner, in copiousness of illustration; by Douglass, in humor and in pathos: but, after all, in the perfect moulding of the orator, he surpassed not merely each of these, but all of them combined. What the Revolutionary orators would now seem to us, we cannot tell: but it is pretty certain, that of all our post-Revolutionary speakers, save Webster only, Wendell Phillips stood at the head; while he and Webster represented types of oratory so essentially different that any comparison between them is like trying to compare an oak-tree and a pine.

He was not moody or variable, or did not seem so: yet he always approached the hour of speaking with a certain reluctance, and never could quite sympathize with the desire to listen either to him or to any one else. As he walked toward the lecture-room he would say to

a friend, "Why do people go to lectures? There is a respectable man and woman; they must have a good home: why do they leave it for the sake of hearing somebody talk?" This was not affectation, but the fatigue of playing too long on one string. Just before coming on the platform at a convention, he would remark with absolute sincerity, "I have absolutely nothing to say;" and then would go on to make, especially if hissed or interrupted, one of his very best speeches. Nothing spurred him like opposition; and it was not an unknown thing for one of his young admirers to take a back seat in the hall, in order to stimulate him by a counterfeited hiss if the meeting seemed tame. Then the unsuspecting orator would rouse himself like a lion. When this opposition came not from friends but foes, it was peculiarly beneficial; and perhaps the greatest oratorical triumph he ever accomplished was on that occasion in Faneuil Hall (Jan. 30, 1852), when it was re-opened to the abolitionists after the capture of the slave Thomas Sims. Mr. Webster's friends were there in force, and drowned Mr. Phillips's voice by repeated cheers for their favorite; when Mr. Phillips so turned the laugh against them each time, in the intervals when they paused for breath, that their cheers grew fainter and fainter, and he had at last mobbed the mob.

He used to deny having trained himself for a public speaker; drew habitually from but few books, Tocqueville's "Democracy in America" being among the chief of these; but read newspapers enormously, and magazines a good deal, while he had the memory of an orator or a literary man, never letting pass an effective anecdote or a telling fact. These he turned to infinite account, never sparing ammunition, and never fearing to repeat himself. He used to say that he knew but one

thing thoroughly, — the history of the English Revolution. — and from this he obtained morals whenever he wanted them; and, to tell the truth, used them in almost any direction. He knew the history of the American Revolution also, Sam Adams being his favorite hero. He was a thorough Bostonian too, and his anti-slavery enthusiasm never rose quite so high as when blended with local patriotism. No one who heard it can ever forget the thrilling modulation of his voice when he said, at some special crisis of the anti-slavery agitation, "I love inexpressibly these streets of Boston, over whose pavements my mother held up tenderly my baby feet; and, if God grants me time enough, I will make them too pure to bear the footsteps of a slave." At the very outset he doubtless sometimes prepared his speeches with care; but his first great success was won off-hand, and afterward, during that period of incessant practice, which Emerson makes the secret of his power, he relied generally upon his vast accumulated store of facts and illustrations, and his tried habit of thinking on his legs. On special occasions he would still make preparation, and sometimes, though rarely, wrote out his speeches beforehand. No one could possibly recognize this, however. He never seemed more at his ease, more colloquial, more thoroughly extemporaneous, than in his address before the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Cambridge: yet it had all been sent to the Boston daily papers in advance, and appeared with scarcely a word's variation, except where he had been compelled to omit some passages for want of time. That was, in some respects, the most remarkable effort of his life: it was a tardy recognition of him by his own college and his own literary society; and he held an unwilling audience spell-bound, while bating absolutely nothing of his radicalism. Many a respectable lawyer or divine felt his blood run cold,

the next day, when he found that the fascinating orator whom he had applauded to the echo had really made the assassination of an emperor seem as trivial as the doom of a mosquito.

He occupied during most of his life the willing position of a tribune of the people; nor was there any social class with which he was unwilling to be, logically and politically at least, identified. Emerson, while thoroughly true to the anti-slavery movement, always confessed to feeling a slight instinctive aversion to negroes; Theodore Parker uttered frankly his dislike of the Irish. Yet neither of these had distinctly aristocratic impulses, while Phillips had. His conscience set them aside so imperatively, that he himself hardly knew that they were there. He was always ready to be identified with the colored people; always ready to give his oft-repeated lecture on O'Connell, to the fellow-countrymen of that hero: but in these and all cases his democratic habit had the good-natured air of some kindly young prince; he never was quite the equal associate that he seemed. The want of it never was felt by his associates: it was in his dealing with antagonists, that the real attitude came out. When he once spoke contemptuously of those who dined with a certain Boston club which had censured him, as "men of no family," the real mental habit appeared. And in his external aspect and bearing the patrician air never quite left him, — the air that he had in college days, or in that period when, as Edmund Quincy delighted to tell, an English visitor pointed out to George Ticknor two men walking down Park Street, and added the cheerful remark, "They are the only men I have seen in your country who looked like gentlemen." The two men were the abolitionists Quincy and Phillips, in whose personal aspect the conservative Ticknor could see little to commend.

There is no fame so intoxicating or so transient as that of mere oratory. Some of the most accomplished public speakers whom America has produced have died within a few years, in mid-career, and left scarcely a ripple on the surface. Two of these, to name no others, were Ex-Governor Bullock of Massachusetts, and Professor Diman of Rhode Island. Neither of them had the fortune to be identified with any great moral enterprise, or to stand before the public for a long time, and be the mouthpiece of its indignation or its demands. It was not chance that gave this position to Wendell Phillips: a great many elements of genius, studies, social prestige, and moral self-sacrifice, had to be combined to produce it. It never turned his head: his aims were too high for that; and he was aided by the happy law of compensation, which is apt to make men indifferent to easily-won laurels. There is no doubt, that, in the height of his fame as a lecturer or platform-speaker, he often chafed under the routine and the fatigue; and felt, that, had not fate or Providence betrayed him, his career would have been very different. He knew, that coming forward into life with his powers, and at the time he did, he might probably have won the positions which went easily to men less richly endowed, — as Abbott Lawrence and Robert C. Winthrop, — and that, had he been once within the magic circle of public office, he could have used it for noble ends, like his favorite, Sir Samuel Romilly. "What I should have liked," he said once to a friend, "would have been the post of United-States senator for Massachusetts;" and, though he never even dreamed of this as possible for himself, he saw his friend Sumner achieve a position which he, could he once have accepted its limitations, might equally have adorned.

It is impossible to say how public office might have

affected him; whether it would have given him just that added amount of reasonableness and good judgment which in later years seemed often wanting, or whether it would have only betrayed him to new dangers. He never had it, and the perilous lifelong habits of the platform told upon him. The platform-speaker has his especial dangers, as conspicuously as the lawyer or the clergyman; he acquires insensibly the mood of a gladiator, and, the better his fencing, the more he becomes the slave of his own talent. *Les hommes exercés à l'escrime ont beau vouloir ménager leur adversaire, l'habitude est plus forte, ils ripostent malgré eux.* As under this law the Vicomte de Camors seduced, almost against his will, the wife of the comrade to whom he had pledged his life, so Wendell Phillips, once with rapier in hand, insensibly fought to win as well as for the glory of God. The position once taken must be maintained, — the opponent must be overwhelmed by almost any means. No advocate in any court was quicker than he to shift his ground, to introduce a new shade of meaning, to abandon an obvious interpretation and insist on a more subtle one. Every man makes mistakes; but you might almost count upon your ten fingers the number of times that Wendell Phillips, during his whole lifetime, owned himself to be in the wrong, or made a concession to an adversary. In criticising his career in this respect, we may almost reverse the celebrated censure passed on the charge of the Six Hundred, and may say that it was not heroic, but it was war.

If this was the ease during the great contest with slavery, the evil was more serious after slavery fell. The civil war gave to Phillips, as it gave to many men, an opportunity; but it was not, in his case, a complete opportunity. At first he was disposed to welcome secession, as fulfilling the wishes of years; "to "build,"

as he said, "a bridge of gold for the Southern States to walk over in leaving the Union." This mood passed; and he accepted the situation, aiding the departing regiments with voice and purse. Yet it was long before the war took a genuinely anti-slavery character, and younger men than he were holding aloof from it for that reason. He distrusted Lincoln for his deliberation, and believed in Frémont; in short, for a variety of reasons, took no clear and unmistakable attitude. After the war had overthrown slavery, the case was even worse. It was a study of character to note the differing demeanors of the great abolitionist leaders after that event. Edmund Quincy found himself wholly out of harness, *désœuvré*: there was no other battle worth fighting. He simply reverted, for the rest of his life, to that career of cultivated leisure from which the anti-slavery movement had wrenched him for forty years; he was a critic of music, a frequenter of the theatres. Garrison, on the other hand, with his usual serene and unabated vigor, went on contending for the rights of the freedmen and of women, as, before, for those of the slaves. Unlike either of these, Wendell Phillips manifested for the remainder of his life a certain restlessness; always seemed to be crying, like Shakspeare's *Hotspur*, "Fye upon this idle life!" and to be always seeking for some new tournament. This would not perhaps have been an evil, had he not carried with him into each new enterprise the habits of the platform, and of the anti-slavery platform in particular. There never was a great moral movement so logically simple as the anti-slavery reform: once grant that man could not rightfully hold property in man, and the intellectual part of the debate was settled; only the moral appeal remained, and there Wendell Phillips was master, and could speak as one having

authority. Slavery gone, the temperance and woman-suffrage agitations remained for him as before. But he also found himself thrown, by his own lifelong habit, into a series of new reforms, where the questions involved were wholly different from those of the anti-slavery movement, and were indeed at a different stage of development. You could not settle the relations of capital and labor off-hand, by saying, as in the case of slavery, "Let my people go:" the matter was far more complex. It was like trying to adjust a chronometer with no other knowledge than that won by observing a sun-dial. In dealing with questions of currency, it was still worse. And yet Wendell Phillips went on, for the remainder of his life, preaching crusades on these difficult problems, which he gave no sign of ever having seriously studied; and appealing to sympathy and passion as ardently as if he still had three million slaves for whom to plead.

It was worse still, when, with the natural habit of a reformer, he found himself readily accepting the companionship into which these new causes brought him. The tone of the anti-slavery apostles was exceedingly high, but there were exceptions even there. "He is a great scoundrel," said Theodore Parker of a certain blatant orator in Boston, "but he loves liberty." It was true, and was fairly to be taken into account. You do not demand a Sunday-school certificate from the man who is rescuing your child from a burning house. But it is to be said, beyond this, that, though the demagogue and the true reformer are at opposite extremes, they have certain points in common. Society is apt to make them both for a time outcasts, and outcasts fraternize. They alike distrust the staid and conventional class, and they are distrusted by it. When a man once falls into the habit of measuring merit by martyrdoms, he dis-

criminate less closely than before, and the best-abused man, whatever the ground of abuse, seems nearest to sainthood. Mr. Phillips, at his best, had not always shown keen discrimination as a judge of character; and the fact that the Boston newspapers thought ill of General Butler, for instance, was to him a strong point in that gentleman's favor. In this he showed himself less able to discriminate than his old associate Stephen Foster, one of the most heroic and frequently mobbed figures in anti-slavery history; for Stephen Foster sat with reluctance to see Caleb Cushing rudely silenced in Faneuil Hall by his own soldiers, after the Mexican war; and lamented that so good a mob, which might have helped the triumph of some great cause, should be wasted on one whom he thought so worthless a creature. Fortunate it would have been for Wendell Phillips if he had gone no farther than this; but he insisted on arguing from the mob to the man, forgetting that people may be censured as well for their sins as for their virtues. The last years of his life thus placed him in close co-operation with one whose real motives and methods were totally unlike his own, — indeed, the most unscrupulous soldier of fortune who ever posed as a Friend of the People on this side the Atlantic.

But all these last days, and the increasing irritability with which he impulsively took up questions to which he could contribute little beyond courage and vehemence, will be at least temporarily forgotten now that he is gone. They will disappear from memory like the selfishness of Hancock, or the vanity of John Adams, in the light of a devoted, generous, and courageous career. With all his faults, his inconsistencies, his impetuous words, and his unreasoning prejudices, Wendell Phillips belonged to the heroic type. Whether we regard him mainly as an orator, or as a participant in

important events, it is certain that no history of the United States will ever be likely to omit him. It is rarely that any great moral agitation bequeaths to posterity more than two or three names: the English slave-trade abolition has left only Clarkson and Wilberforce in memory; the great Corn Law contest, only Cobden and Bright. The American anti-slavery movement will probably embalm the names of Garrison, Phillips, and John Brown. This is for the future to decide. Meanwhile, it is certain that Wendell Phillips had, during life, that quality which Emerson thought the highest of all qualities, — of being “something that cannot be skipped or undermined.” Now that he is gone, even those who most criticised him will instinctively feel that one great chapter of American history is closed.



