

Wendell Phillips's Grave

Dyer D. Lum

June 20, 1885

A ragged urchin, half a score years old,
In Boston stood, accordeon in hand,
Beside that spot beneath whose grave-yard mold
In silence lay a patriotic band:
The humble heroes who with sword and gun
Opened the struggle that our fathers won.
The cold, bleak wind of a December eve
In angry gusts blew 'long the drifted street,
Where few of Fashion's throng paused to relieve
The want that did melodiously entreat,
As e'er anew he strove, with childish art,
In time-worn tunes to reach some friendly heart.
No other tale of sorrow or distress
He told, as there he stood with Poverty
Holding his instrument in soft caress,
Then flowed forth in his strains of melody.
Behind him cold and silent lay the dead;
Before him Christian Levites onward sped.
Beyond the railing lay 'neath sculptured stone
The men whose fame is wrought in Church and State:
Before the railing one of flesh and bone,
A waif of misery, the sport of fate.
On one side — nobles of a well-born race;
The other — driftwood of the populace!
But one who, gazing through the falling veil
Of gloom that twilight o'er the church-yard drew
To shroud the famous dead beyond the rail,
Upon whose tombs the lengthening shadows grew,
Musing with sadness on the strange contrast,
In softened tones addressed the poor outcast.

“My little man,” he asked, “canst tell me where
Within the grave of Wendell Phillips lies?”
A brigh’ning smile stole o’er the face of care
And animation beamed forth from his eyes;
He seemed transformed, his youthful besom swelled,
As if the name had care and want dispelled.

“Right here, sir,” answered he, “close where I stand;
It is the only one there that I know.”
Hear this, ye dead that Church and State term grand!
Ye living statesmen, bow your foreheads low!
The greater liberty which Phillips sought.
By outcast hearts and hands may yet be wrought!

O Phillips! Though no monumental shaft
May mark the spot where thou art laid to rest,
Thy name within the people’s heart ingraft
Far more than sculptor’s art thy fame attest.
No stone need rise beside that busy mart;
Thou hast thy urn in every lowly heart.

Contrast! O whisper not the slavish thought!
The soul that glowed beneath that ragged breast
Had bridged the chasm, and from thy soul had caught
The love that gave thy eloquence such zest;
And sweeter far that childish requiem
Than stately pomp or priest-blessed diadem.

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