

John Brown, Direct Actionist

Max Baginski

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In this era of speculation one can become a great celebrity at the same rate as one's fortune grows. The number of enemies' scalps indicated with some savage tribes the degree of glory attained by a hero. The number of millions stamps the hero of commercial culture. There is a certain relationship between the two, for the Wall Street hero must also earn his glory by cutting the throats of his competitors and of many a lamb, before he can boast of having arrived.

The life story of this brand of hero, as heralded in our high-class magazines, fills one with considerable disgust. One feels inclined to interpret the Darwinian motto of the survival of the fittest to mean the survival of the biggest scoundrel. Whoever does not care to have his children specially trained as thieves and social highwaymen will not particularly insist on their reading the "biographies" of the Morgans and Rockefellers.

What is most necessary nowadays, when it is so urgent to wake the people from their stupor and to inspire them with confidence in their own strength and initiative; is the example of men and women who with high idealism combined the will to act.

Such an idealist was John Brown, whose simplicity and wholeheartedness called forth from Ralph Waldo Emerson the tribute: "He is so transparent that all men see him through."

It was this man who, at the head of twenty-one Abolitionists, on October 16, 1859, attacked the State armory at Harper's Ferry, and expropriated the 20,000 weapons it contained. Harper's Ferry was a place of 5,000 inhabitants, situated at the confluence of the Shenandoah and the Potomac. John Brown, aided by his sixteen white and five black comrades, took possession of the town without much difficulty, imprisoned the small garrison in the cellar, cut the telegraph wires, and obstructed the railroad line. His object was to use the place as his base of operations, from which to make armed invasions into the slave States, to free and arm the negroes, so far as possible, and in this manner organize a general uprising of the slaves.

The slave-holders of the South were wild with fear and rage. The government of the free American people at Washington immediately made common cause with the noble dealers in human flesh, to crush the bold rebels. Fifteen hundred soldiers were dispatched to the scene, and "order" was soon restored. The two sons of John Brown were among the first shot down, and the greater number of the Abolitionists were left dead on the field.

John Brown, together with three surviving comrades, was taken prisoner. A soldier struck him in the face with his gun; another sank his bayonet twice into the body of the venerable man. Then followed the farce of a trial that ended with the verdict of hanging. At the execution

there took place a horrible scene. After the white death-cap had been drawn over the face of the rebel, and the noose fastened about his neck, he was forced to remain standing on the trap-door of the gallows almost a quarter of an hour, while the officer in command had his soldiers go through some military drills. This so outraged even some of the soldiers that many protested with loud cries of "Shame!" Finally the trap was sprung, but in such a manner that ten minutes elapsed before death mercifully terminated John Brown's agony. He was literally slowly choked to death.

The character, the struggle and death of John Brown, as well as his proud and uncompromising attitude in court, have nurtured in thousands of hearts that wrath and enthusiasm, without which great deeds cannot be accomplished.

Of the life of this man of action it is known that already at an early age he hated slavery, and later grew to despise everything that bore the odor of politics,—an attitude he shared with Wendell Philips and David Thoreau. He was firm as a rock in his convictions, and his principles and tactics were in complete accord with his inmost nature. To take up arms, with small means and few comrades, against the institution of slavery, against the rich slaveholders aided by all the forces of government—he did not consider that anything extraordinary. He thought it inevitable and simple, from the moment that he was convinced that only by force of arms could the dealers in human flesh be despoiled of their trade. It was in this spirit that already in 1854 he removed to Kansas, accompanied only by his six sons, there to begin a campaign of liberating the negro slaves and speeding them across the Canadian border. On one of these occasions he lost his son Frederick, who was waylaid and shot to death. The leader of the ruffian gang responsible for that murder was a priest named Martin White, who was rewarded for his dastardly act with a seat in the legislature of his State. However, he did not enjoy his evil-won honors long: one day he was found stretched on the prairie, dead, with a bullet in his heart.

Significant of the spirit and aims of John Brown is a proclamation submitted by him to a convention of Abolitionists in 1858. One of the articles of that document (Article 23) proposes common ownership of all property, as follows:

"All expropriated and confiscated property and all the property that is the product of the labor of the members of the organization, as well as that of their families, shall be regarded as common property of the whole body, to be used only for the common welfare...All the gold, jewelry, and other valuables taken from the enemy should be devoted to the war fund."

Thus John Brown fought during a term of twenty years. For him there was no peace as long as slavery existed. His memory as a rebel of high ideals and indomitable spirit will never be forgotten.

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