

The Rev. SELLA MARTIN, in supporting the resolution, said:—

Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentleman,—When I was invited to take part in the proceedings of this evening, I accepted the invitation with the liveliest satisfaction, both because of my personal acquaintance with the martyr, the anniversary of whose death we celebrate, and the reverence which I entertain for his character. I remember well the second and last time that I ever saw the glorious old man, as being one of the most solemnly impressive hours of my life. I had been invited to take part in a secret meeting, called to secure the advice and co-operation of the colored people of the section of country where I then was, respecting the enterprise which ended in the death of John Brown, and which began the death of slavery. (Applause).

It was in 1858, in a western city of the United States, just after the great struggle in which our martyr bore so conspicuous and influential a part, to redeem Kansas from the murderous control of the border ruffians and the terrible curse of slavery. John Brown and one or two of his white followers were present.

The proceedings were begun with *prayer*; a weapon which, under the direction of John Brown's faith, became more potent than the pike in the hands of his followers. (Applause).

After prayer, the noble old man arose to his feet to unfold to the company his plans. They were stated with great candour, illustrated at great length, and with peculiar plainness; but though submitted with his usual modesty, they were defended with tremendous conviction.

"I design," said he, "to make a few midnight raids upon the plantations, to give those who are willing among the slaves the opportunity of joining us, or escaping; and it matters little whether we begin with many or few. Having done this for two or three times until the neighbourhood becomes alarmed, and the generality of the slaves encouraged, we will retire to the fastnesses of the Alleghany mountains, and ever and anon strike unexpected, though bloodless, blows upon the old dominion; in the meantime sending the slaves, who desire to go, to the north. We shall by this means conquer without bloodshed, awaken the slaves to the possibility of escape, and frighten the slaveholders into a desire to get rid of slavery." When

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he took his seat, the coloured men, with one consent, opposed his plans. For any considerable body of men to subsist in the mountains was, in their estimation, impossible; and to attempt to get slaves to the north by means of frequent raids rather than by the underground railway, was scouted as foolish and feared to be disastrous. That the slaves were ready for such a movement was doubted, and that the money to carry on the work would be forthcoming was denied. These opposing arguments were put forth with deference to the old man's judgment, and respect for his feelings as well as his character; and to my mind they were put forth with consummate ability and conclusive force.

I did not then understand the secret of his infatuation, but I learned it some months after. When he lay bleeding and helpless at Harper's Ferry, his spirit rising in the grandeur of its calmness above the wreck of his enterprize, his lips unsealed by the candour of the dying, but his brow unblanched by the dangers of death, then I understood that that spirit caught the light and beauty of self-sacrifice while standing on the lofty summit of a mountainous faith, and that they had blended them into the halo of transfiguration, for the hour of his martyrdom. (Applause.) I recalled the scene of that night's meeting, and it then occurred to me that while *we* were then pointing to our idols of data, proof, conclusion, *he*, made acquainted with higher truths and breathing the atmosphere of a nobler conviction, was pointing to the altar of, to us, an unknown God, whom we were ignorantly worshipping, and who maketh all things possible to him that believeth. (Applause.) John Brown, in his life and in his death, furnished another example of the truth, that though there may be many kinds of immortal names, there is but one kind of immortal character, and that is the character of the martyr. When John Brown, with crumbling logic, halting argument, unsound conclusion, stood before his coloured brethren in the seeming infatuation of obstinacy, it was only because, having been caught up into the third heaven of a righteous cause, he had heard things not lawful, and I suppose not possible for man to utter. (Applause.) "John Brown

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was right,” said a noble-hearted man, who, in uttering these words, was lifted as if by the breath of his own candour and the strength of the people’s approval of it into the gubernatorial chair of Massachusetts. Yes, John Brown was right; if not as to his method, at least as to his inspiration and his aim, and his righteousness produced two results. He touched and awakened the religious heart of the white Americans, and revived the dying hopes of the black race.

However ministers of the gospel may resent, and as I think justly, the infidel charge of priestcraft, it cannot be denied that the pecuniary interests involved in their support, the building of houses of worship, and therefore the retaining of wealthy members, have a powerful conservative influence in bringing them to agree with one another, and nearly all of them to agree with the powers that be. So that though the church is an ark containing at least pairs of all the truths worthy to be preserved, yet the doors are sealed so tightly to keep out the flood of iniquity, that the ministers can no more get out than those called the sinners can get in. (Laughter). Well, for thirty years at least the American Ministers were just such prisoners, and they were glad for the church to rest at last on some political Ararat like the fact of John Brown’s martyrdom, that they might have the opportunity of bursting their prison doors, and touching the green earth of a common humanity once more. (Applause). They had thought before that abolitionists were all infidels, but when they heard that an abolitionist was about to die with as sweet a resignation and as calm a faith as ever man died with; about to leave as broad a mantle of charity, and as noble a spirit of forgiveness, as ever covered or breathed upon the guilty, this side of Calvary; when they learned that this apostle of freedom had been thoroughly furnished for his work by passages from that Divine Book which they found “profitable for doctrine, reproof, and instruction in righteousness,” and that he was scattering them through his wonderful letters, written in a prison where the angel came, not to break his chains, but to touch his lips with a live coal from God’s altar; scattering them with a force of illustration, a depth of meaning, a power of pathos, and a wonder of application, which will consecrate them as part of the martyr literature

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of the age; when they heard and learned all this, why, they prayed for him—(great applause)—and for ministers to do such a thing for an abolitionist was as prophetic of a revolution as clouds are of a storm. (Laughter). Why, sir, the abolitionists were as suspicious of a minister as the Christians were of Saul of Tarsus, and the watch-word of confidence was “behold he prayeth” for John Brown. The ministers were followed by their churches, and on the day of our martyr’s death there were at least three prayer meetings in white churches where he was remembered. Thus began, sir, that religious awakening in the American Church which now makes every Sunday solemn with petitions for the overthrow of slavery; which flings open the pew door to the negro; which heaps eulogy upon the colored soldier; and, greatest proof of sincerity of all, which would welcome the presence of Garrison or Phillips. (Applause).

When the slaves learned that John Brown’s murder was condemned by the North, and that many of their masters were as terribly frightened by northern condemnation of the deed, as they were grimly satisfied at the murder, their hope began to revive.

But they and their colored brethren in the north had to go through a few dark hours before they could see the coming dawn of that glorious proclamation which now lights them to the field of battle, and promises them a return of triumph with a future of glory. It was but a year after his death that a few young men, of whom I was one, undertook to observe the anniversary of it as we do to-night. But we were prevented by the most gentlemanly mob that ever did the work of ruffians. The prestige of aristocracy, the authority of position, the influence of wealth, the honours of learning, and the power of civil office, all conspired, not only to rob us of our hall of meeting, but to rob us of the dearest right known to an Englishman or American in public, the right of free speech. (Applause). When our meeting was thus broken up, our white friends concerned in getting it up retired in disgust. But the hopes which had been inspired by the example and death of John Brown in the breasts of the coloured people bound them to an observance of the day, even though some of them should be honoured by dying as John Brown died—

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martyrs to the cause. A colored young man, therefore, gave notice during the raging of the mob, that the meeting would adjourn to a colored church, of which he was pastor, and in that colored church the meeting was held that night; and though surrounded by a mob of ten thousand white people, who seemed to thirst for the blood of Wendell Phillips, the chief orator of the occasion, resolutions, worthy of the hour and the man, were passed. On the platform with him sat John Brown, junior, the son of our martyr, whose presence was an inspiration and a power.

I shall never forget that night, Mr. Chairman,—the crowded meeting-house, which, as Mr. Phillips said, became the asylum of free speech; the expressions of solemn earnestness and courageous interest which the faces of the colored people wore; the deep reverential silence with which the name of John Brown was received; the uproarious applause which greeted his son as he arose to speak, are all worthy of remembrance. And, more than all, the packed platform arises before me, on which sat the two greatest orators in America, Wendell Phillips and Frederick Douglass. It may not be known to all of us that the first (Wendell Phillips) brought to his early espousals of the anti-slavery cause, amplitude of means, when his co-labourers were poor; great social position, when they were despised; and the ripest scholarship from the oldest university of the nation, to associate, with respect and love, with the unlettered. But it is known to you, that along with the most marvellous power of expression, the purest language, the most silvery oratory that modern times has known, Mr. Phillips possesses a love for, and a faith in, humanity, broad enough for the oppressed of every country, and the slaves of every clime, to secure upon them the firm foothold of manhood. (Great applause). The other, Frederick Douglass, you know, brought to his work in the beginning only great experience in slavery. But the glory of the work itself has been shed upon his powerful mind to such an extent, that in oratory there is nothing too great for its power, and nothing too minute for its care. And the terrible experience of a victim to slavery has been turned into such a wealth of sympathy with his brethren, that his voice, like the clouds, can fill an audience-

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room with tears, as well as shake it with thunderbolts. (Applause). And I can tell you, my friends, speaking as a lover of John Brown's name, and an admirer of these two great men, they were true both to him and themselves that night. In speaking of these men, so great and so useful, who were present that night at the risk of limb and life, I may have given you an idea of what the good and true think of John Brown in America.

Though these were dark times and troublous, Mr. Chairman, there was more noise than hurt in their results. Indeed, they were serving our cause. Thunder does not kill, but lightning does; and these mobs were but the thunder of opposing forces, setting free the lightning of truth and right. I learned then that the reformer has nothing to do with anxiety about results. From the hour of John Brown's death, the negro has been led by his teachings in the pathway of social, political, and moral redemption.

"John Brown's body lies mouldering in the grave,
But his soul goes marching on,"

is not only a song; it is a creed as well, to the great majority of the slaves. In the South they seal the Bible to the slaves, they hide the form and scales of justice from the eyes, they keep the words of the declaration of independence from their ears; but the fact that John Brown died for *them*, that on the way to the scaffold he stooped to kiss a *coloured* child; that his dying testimony was, that he was of infinitely more use to the cause in giving his life for it, than he could be in any other way, has brought to their knowledge, by a living impersonation, God's great declaration, that he has made of one blood all nations of men to dwell on all the face of the earth. (Great applause.) Old Virginia, which put him to death, was the first among the slave states to realize, and no doubt will be the last to recover from, the devastation of war; but she has also been (unwillingly it may be) the first and largest contributor of coloured troops who are fighting to overthrow the system which John Brown gave his life to attack. Thus has it ever been, Mr. Chairman; lofty conviction in a pure soul has always been, and always will be, too powerful for the

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most gigantic wrong in the best wrought mail. Between slavery and freedom, the battle is the Lord's; and the youth who brings the sling of sincerity and the stone of truth, will be more than a match for the skilful warrior and his ponderous weapons.

Mr. George Thompson has done me the honour of referring to my offering the thanksgiving prayer at St. James's Hall, when the American ambassador was the guest. I will tell you of a better sign of progress; the Americans are praying themselves, and for themselves. They have caught the prayerful spirit of our martyr, and are wrestling now, as did Jacob of old, for a new character as well as a new name. (Applause). I will tell you of a better sign still; they have put themselves in such a position that the slaves can pray for them. The former victim becomes a friend; the despised joins them in a fellowship of danger, trial, suffering, death, and immortality. The slave becomes a man, a citizen, a soldier; and in the formerly proscribed negro, the North sees, not only its hope of success, but also the permanent strength of its cause. If they do not now see it, then must they suffer till they do. As they have given a place to the Scotchman, with his moral traits and religious tenacity; to the Englishman, with his practical brain and skill; to the Frenchman, with all his social grace; to the German, with his tireless mind and plodding thought; so too must they give a place to the negro, with his great beating heart of love and faith, or reap the direst curse of their prejudices. (Prolonged applause).

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