

John Brown

Elisée Reclus

1867

John Brown was one of those hard-working Americans whose education in a free society fitted them for the most varied occupations. Raised as a trapper in the forests of the West, he became successively a tanner, a shepherd, a wool merchant, a farmer; he also frequently changed his residence, living in turn in Connecticut, Ohio, the State of New York, Pennsylvania, and in his commercial voyages he even crossed the Atlantic to visit England, France, and Germany. Returning from Europe in 1849, he settled near the village of North-Elba (New York), in a cold valley of the Adirondack Mountains, and there, helped by his valiant wife and ten children, he set about clearing the land and tending the cattle.

But this peasant was at the same time a citizen. Full of the sense of his duties towards society, he wanted, above all things, to work for the happiness of his compatriots, to contribute his part to the great work of the improvement of the human race. Hatred of injustice penetrated him, and, in his conversations, he never ceased to recall the sufferings of the weak and the oppressed. He raised his children to the mission of redressers of wrongs, he had made heroic devotion to the cause of the unfortunate, the very soul of the family, the genius of the domestic hearth.

And yet, around him, in the free communes of the Northern States, he saw little but signs of prosperity. The farmers, his neighbors, earned their living honestly, and enjoyed the most complete freedom, schools were open in all the surrounding villages; peace existed throughout the federal territory, poverty was almost unknown there, the material progress of the nation was without example in the world. Most Americans, selfishly proud of their liberties, thought that all was well in the best of republics.

It is true that the white nation of the Northern States was happier than any nation on earth had ever been, but the blacks who passed like shadows beside the citizens were only despised pariahs, and in the Southern States, African slaves were counted by the millions.

There, the field workers, instead of being owners of their land and the products obtained by their labors, were on the contrary beasts of burden bought and sold, beings deprived of a legal name, placed outside the family itself, since their children belonged to the master. "The slave," said all the codes of the Southern States, "the slave is a thing and not a man: he is an automaton equipped with arms to work, shoulders to support the yoke, a spine to receive the lashes of the whip. It is an object that the master can exchange, sell, rent, mortgage, store, play with palettes or knucklebones; it is nothing, less than nothing. The Negro, proclaimed a famous decision of

the Supreme Court of the United States, the Negro has no rights that the white man is bound to respect.”

These were the abominations that grieved John Brown.

At the age of twelve, on a journey he made to Virginia, he had sworn to himself, on seeing a little Negro being whipped, that for the rest of his life he would side with the weak against the strong. His farm at North Elba had become one of the most important stations on that “underground railroad” by which fugitive slaves from the Southern States escaped to Canada. John Brown welcomed them as brothers, gave them provisions for the journey, marked out their stops, and, arming himself with his rifle, accompanied them at night through the woods to the home of the nearest affiliate. And yet Brown reproached himself for not doing more for the work of liberty.

After holding a family council, towards the end of 1854, John Brown and his sons decided that they would abandon the free and peaceful land of the Northern States to go and settle in Kansas, on the very border of the country of slavery. It was both by the plow and by the rifle that they wanted to work towards the conquest of this new territory: by cultivating the soil themselves, they would oppose a barrier to the invasions of the planters and maintain the dignity of manual labor; by defending their fields by arms, they would allow peaceful settlers to settle in the still uncultivated lands of the West, and thus increase the free population. It was a war to the death between the two societies that clashed on the banks of the Kansas. On one side, the Missourians arrived, dragging behind them their slave galleys; on the other came the Yankee laborers, clearing the land themselves, opening schools in the barely opened clearings, establishing printing presses under the great trees of the forest. The planters decreed a state constitution, making slavery the “cornerstone” of their society; the abolitionists voted another, asserting that servitude was “the sum of all infamies.” The slaveholders burned the cabins of the pioneers; the latter made incursions into Missouri to free the blacks; armed bands met on the frontier; for long years blood continued to flow. In this implacable struggle between slavery and freedom, no partisan leader was more audacious, more fertile in resource, more indefatigable than “Captain” John Brown. In these incessant struggles he lost one of his noble sons, another went mad; but, in the end, he had the joy of seeing that the abolitionists would prevail. Despite the connivance of the President of the United States with the planters, despite the treason of the governor and the entire local administration, the free population of Kansas continued to increase, the slaveholders no longer dared to cross the border; the servile institution, definitively limited on the Western side, was going to suffer its first great defeat in the United States.

John Brown, already nearly sixty, could have enjoyed his triumph in peace, he could have cultivated these fields, watered with the blood of his sons and thought, finally, of amassing a small fortune for his old age; but his heart was too lofty, he loved the oppressed of the South too much not to devote to them what remained of his life. He resolved to carry out a project that he had been nourishing for more than twenty years, that of transporting himself into the heart of enemy country to emancipate on a grand scale. Accompanied by three of his sons, two sons-in-law, and a few men of like heart, he went to settle on an abandoned farm, situated in the country of slavery, near the Virginian town of Harper’s Ferry, and for several months he secretly made his military preparations for his great work of liberation. John Brown’s plan was to seize the arsenal of Harper’s Ferry, very rich in arms of all kinds, to cut the important lines of railroads which converge on this point, then to throw himself into the gorges of the mountains to harass incessantly the bands organized by the planters and to show himself unexpectedly now

at one point, now at another, as a liberator of the negroes. He expected to be able to hold out, if necessary, for years, in this wild country of the Alleghanies, until finally the slaves, raised by thousands, had been able to conquer their freedom by force of arms.

The first blow succeeded perfectly. At the head of his small band of 21 men, including 5 blacks and 16 whites, John Brown seized the arsenal during the night, occupied the railroad bridge over the Potomac and took about sixty prisoners. During the whole first half of the following day, he remained completely master of a town of 3,000 inhabitants; but in the desire to convince the population that he wanted to do no harm to his captives and that he was only asking for the freedom of a slave, fighters were wounded there; entire populations died of poverty and hunger, vast provinces were devastated; the immense wealth accumulated in the estates of the planters was almost entirely destroyed. But also, when the terrible struggle ended with the victory of the free citizens of the North, servitude was finally abolished; four million blacks who, the day before, had been simple merchandise, had become men; the Republic, freed from its crime, had immediately placed itself, by its progress in all kinds, at the head of civilized nations. And in this immense victory, John Brown, who died before the war, did perhaps more than all the others, for it was his memory that inspired the white abolitionists and the 180,000 blacks fighting in the Army of the North. It was he who celebrated the hymn of deliverance sung by the soldiers marching to battle:

“John Brown’s body rots in the pit—and the captives he tried to save still weep;—he lost his life fighting for the slave;—but his soul marches before us!—Glory! Glory! Alleluia!—His soul marches before us!”

It is to the memory of this man so great in character, and so great in the work accomplished, that Mad. Gael invites us to pay homage.

Our duty is to respond to this call with all the more eagerness, since we have allowed eight long years to elapse without giving the family of the victim the testimony of sympathy to which they were entitled from all who love justice. Last year, Mrs. Lincoln received with emotion the address and the medal which fifty thousand Frenchmen sent her, in memory of the services which the assassinated president had rendered to the republic. Mrs. Brown, who never attempted to divert her husband from his path of devotion and who made with a heroism of grandiose simplicity the sacrifice of her sons, will not be less touched by the proof of sympathy which we will send her. To work then! We count on all those who fight for right against force, on all those who do not live selfishly for themselves or their family alone and who understand the beauty of sacrifice. As for the admirers of violence, those who despise the rights of the weak, John Brown is for them only a madman, a violator of the laws of his country. We ask nothing of them!

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