

THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY JOHN ELY BRIGGS

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Springdale Recruits

John Brown and his little band of ten men straggled into Springdale one day late in December, 1857. They planned only to rest awhile in the quiet Quaker community, sell their teams and wagons, and then proceed by rail to Ashtabula County, Ohio. But the panic of 'fifty-seven had begun and money was scarce. They were out of funds and temporarily unable to raise any, so they decided to winter among these kind people who were friendly to the cause of liberating the slaves.

Springdale, in Cedar County, was one of the principal Quaker settlements in Iowa. An air of peace and contentment hovered over the neat houses that bordered the public highway for a distance of half a mile. The calm, industrious inhabitants seemed to be more interested in spiritual welfare than worldly needs — people who profited by long hours in silent meeting even though none of the company was

moved to speak; people who dared to make their peculiar costume and mode of address the badges of their convictions. But the Quakers of Springdale were thrifty and shrewd withal. They welcomed John Brown and his men, yet they took care that the belligerent band was quartered at the farm of William Maxson who was not a Quaker. Thus they avoided direct responsibility for sheltering men-at-arms.

If the old hero of Osawatomie and his followers commanded the respect of the leaders in the community they appealed no less to the romantic inclinations of the young people. Rumor was soon confirmed that the "company" of mysterious strangers practiced military tactics daily in Maxson's yard. Could it be true that John Brown was preparing to strike again? In the evenings of that memorable winter, when a group gathered about some neighborhood fireplace or at the schoolhouse, thoughts and conversation ranged far afield from war. A debating society was organized and social activities developed apace. The talents and striking personality of these unusual adventurers quite captivated the imagination of many a Quaker youth — not to mention his sober elders.

To Barclay and Edwin Coppoc the activities of John Brown's men were particularly alluring. Barclay, the younger of the boys, had previously made the acquaintance of Brown in Kansas. When the little band settled down in Springdale for the

winter, it was quite natural that this acquaintance should be renewed and that Edwin Coppoc should also form a strong attachment for his brother's friends and their noble cause. The boys deepened the channels of friendship until they gained the old leader's confidence and could avow their allegiance to his undertaking.

John Brown was fortunate. He could not have enlisted better men than these two. They were not as mature or as well educated as some of the others in his company, but they had native intelligence, sturdy character, and a staunch belief in his cause which steeled them to face death itself without misgivings.

Edwin, at the time Brown and his men were roiling his emotions, was a young man of twenty-two, fair of skin but brown eyed and dark haired. His fondness for athletics had given him a strong and agile body, while his studious nature had lent a quiet "oldness" to his bearing which was accentuated by his rather large head and intelligent countenance. He had been born in a Quaker community near Salem, Ohio, on June 30, 1835. When he was seven his father had died, and the family of six children was scattered. For a time he had lived with his maternal grandfather, and then was taken by John Butler, a worthy Quaker of the community. There he had lived for eight years, working on the farm for his board, and trudging off to school when the weather and the farming permitted. "He was a

very industrious and careful boy," wrote Mr. Butler in November, 1859, "more careful and particular that everything was kept in its proper place on the farm and about the buildings and to have his work done well and prompt to have it done in a given time, than is common for boys of his age."

Barclay, born in the same place as Edwin, on January 4, 1839, was taller than his brother, but of a more slender, delicate build. He had large, heavily lidded eyes, and a determined mouth. From early childhood he had been threatened with tuberculosis, and had, in 1857, just returned from a trip to Kansas where he had gone in an effort to improve his health. There he had witnessed the strife between the free and the slave State factions, and become imbued with the idea of abolishing slavery by force. Of venturesome temperament, he formed a deep attachment for John Brown and became eager to cast his lot with the old crusader against slavery.

The Coppoc boys had been reared in the Quaker faith. Their mother, Ann Lynch Coppoc, a Quaker by birth and a woman of strong and "exemplary" character, was one of the early settlers in Springdale. She had not had her children with her all of the time, but she had done her best to implant the love of God in their hearts. The boys were dutiful sons. Edwin had worked hard on his mother's prairie farm and she had grown to depend upon him, even after her second marriage. She often said she "felt sure of a good crop under Edwin's care." He

had a reputation for being honest, straightforward, and industrious. Barclay was not so steady, perhaps, while his ill-health prevented regular and laborious employment.

Like most Quakers, the Coppoc boys had acquired a strong antipathy for slavery. The community in which they lived was opposed to it, and their mother herself had done much to deepen their convictions along this line. As an institution it was abhorrent to their religion — a faith based upon the fundamental right of every man to be his own keeper. They had also been taught that it was wrong to carry firearms, but the former belief was stronger than the latter. These impulsive young men were not inclined to quibble, as some of the older folks in Springdale might, about the means to the end.

Indeed, it appears that several tenets of the Quaker faith were held in light esteem by these boys. They had developed “wayward tendencies discomfiting to their mother and to the church.” Edwin had been known to dance, and for this cause was “disowned from membership in the Society” on May 6, 1857. Barclay also had given the Friends grave concern and had refused to heed the “spirit of restoring love.” After the Harper’s Ferry episode, the Monthly Meeting reported that “Barclay Coppoc has neglected the attendance of our religious meetings & is in the practice of bearing arms.” In January, 1860, he too was formally disowned. Of their courage, integrity, and devotion to the cause

of abolition, however, there has never been the slightest doubt.

Brown and his men left Springdale in the latter part of April, 1858. During the following year and a half, the little band encountered lean times and depressing circumstances. The men were scattered in various parts of the country, working by the day, while their leader went east and attempted to raise funds for the execution of his plans. Edwin Coppoc spent the summer of 1858 in Kansas, where he bought some land, but he took no part in the slavery conflict there. In February, 1859, Brown and a few of his followers passed through Springdale with a group of eleven negroes whom they were smuggling into Canada. To many of the townspeople this was an occasion for rejoicing. Here was splendid service in the cause of freedom. The Coppoc boys were particularly pleased to see the hero of their dreams. And before Brown departed with his human contraband, he promised to call upon them when his grand scheme was ready for consummation. In the meantime the boys should quietly make preparations to join him at a moment's notice.

After the final departure of Brown from Iowa, Edwin and Barclay Coppoc went to visit friends and relatives at their old home in Ohio. Later in the spring they returned to Springdale. Saying nothing to their mother, they sold most of their stock and hired a negro to take care of the crops. About the middle of July they received the ex-

pected message from Brown, and on the twenty-fifth Barclay said to his mother, "We are going to start to Ohio, to-day."

"Ohio!" she exclaimed, not fooled by his obvious intention to spare her feelings. "I believe you are going with old Brown. When you get the halters around your necks, will you think of me?"

"We can not die in a better cause", Barclay answered bravely.

And neither lived to find a greater one.

PAULINE GRAHAME