

"Peace if possible. Justice at any rate."---Wendell Phillips.

IDA B. WELLS

In England.

AN ADDRESS

**Adopted by a Mass Meeting of Afro-American
Citizens of St. Paul, Minnesota, June 11, 1894,
Under Auspices of Ladies' Home Circle.**

THE APPEAL, ST. PAUL, MINN.

It is well known to the people of the United States that Miss Ida B. Wells, recently of Memphis, Tennessee, is now and has for some time been delivering a series of lectures throughout England and Ireland. The purpose of these lectures is to arouse indignation abroad against the frequent barbarous lynching of Afro-Americans in the Southern States for crimes of which they were not only *not convicted*, but for which they were never tried. Miss Wells assumed this course of appeal to the English people to be necessary and imperative by reason of the indifference of the people of America to crimes against humanity, committed in its own territory and upon its own citizens.

In view of the fact that this action on her part has been severely criticised by the press of the North and has caused her character to be assailed by that of the South—notably by the Memphis Daily Commercial—We, citizens of St. Paul, members of the people in whose behalf Miss Wells has unselfishly staked all that a woman holds most dear, would speak a word in her defense.

To many of us Miss Wells is personally known; to all of us, her reputation has long been familiar. We are glad therefore of this opportunity to express our high esteem for her moral worth, our admiration for the ability displayed in her great work abroad, and our gratitude for the service she has rendered our people. We also hope to add some testimony in corroboration of that already given by Miss Wells.

The Memphis Daily Commercial, a newspaper published at Memphis, Tenn., in its issue of May 26th 1894 has an article brutally and indecently attacking the character of Ida B. Wells. We call attention to the fact that this attack is but another of those crimes committed by (what the Commercial declares to be) "the most chivalrous and gentle men in the world." Crimes—according to that journal—"which grow out of the noblest sentiments possible to men, reverence for womanhood and respect for virtue." The article referred to, contains a paragraph quoted from the Free Speech, an Afro-American newspaper at one time published in Memphis. The paragraph is attributed by the Commercial to Miss Wells, and, in connection with her recent utterances in England is made the basis

of its attack upon her character. The quotation is characterized as the "foul and slanderous tirade of a half-cultured hater of all things Southern," and is cited as an example of the articles which frequently appeared in the Free Speech, and for writing which—as she is accused of having done—Miss Wells was compelled to leave Memphis.

The paragraph referred to is as follows:

"Nobody in this section of the country believes the old threadbare lie that Negro men rape white women. If Southern white men are not careful they will overreach themselves, and public sentiment will have a reaction; and a conclusion will be reached which will be very damaging to the moral reputation of their women."

This we will admit was not calculated to soothe the *amour propre* of Southern men or women, nor was it so intended; but merely as literary workmanship, as conveying an unpalatable suggestion in the least offensive language, we offer it for comparison with the scurrilous performance of the Memphis Commercial.

Upon the appearance of this paragraph the Commercial says: that "eminent and substantial citizens called a meeting from which was issued an order for its author to remove elsewhere." There can be no doubt in the minds of those familiar with Southern methods, as to the consequences had such an order been disregarded. We submit, that the violence threatened by this notice to quit the place, is ample proof that it is not only when charged with violating white women that Afro-Americans are lynched, but when from *any* cause the will of the white citizen is opposed by the black. To intimate that black men do *not* rape white women is construed as an impeachment of the virtue of white women—an offense to be punished by death no less horrible than that meted out to alleged rapists.

We, neither palliate these fearful crimes, defend the criminals, nor deny—what, however, *has not been proved*—that these crimes are of frequent occurrence. We *do* point to the fact that the most fiendish barbarities and horrible deaths have been inflicted not only upon men who have not been accused of these crimes, but upon women also. Petty thefts, simple assaults, acts clearly in self-defense or the defense of one's property or family, lack of "proper

deference" to a white man, all subject an Afro-American to the same fate.

We point to the record of the Afro-American during the late war when his masters were in arms to perpetuate slavery. The women and children of the South were left completely at the mercy of these same people and there is not an instance on record, of a woman violated. This was when the Afro-American was only a chattel. It was not until that hated measure—political equality—was conferred upon him that he became a brute.

The accusation of rape is in our belief—in the absence of proof to the contrary—made for the purpose of stifling the righteous indignation of the civilized world at the atrocious cruelties of lynchers, and there is just grounds for believing that it is often made to shield white women from the consequences of their own indiscretion. Be that as it may it is decreed: *The Afro-American shall be taught, that whatever folly a white woman may commit the suspicion of participation in that folly means torture and death for him.*

We therefore declare that there is ample warrant for the caution conveyed to Southern white men in the paragraph from the Free Speech. When one class mercilessly persecutes another which it believes to be helplessly in its power it becomes reckless; and when the persecuted develops unsuspected resources of defense, the persecutor stands appalled at what confronts him.

Repeated warnings have been given the South that it could not forever oppress the Afro-American with safety, and if the white men of that section are aghast at his defense they must blame themselves. *Must the black man eternally be sacrificed to the white man's vanity?*

We appeal to all just-minded persons, that before passing judgement upon the paragraph quoted from the Free Speech, they will consider for a moment the relations of the two races at the South during the entire period of Negro slavery—extending over two hundred years. We call attention to the fact that out of these relations grew a peculiar system of morals which obtains among the Southern whites at this day; *and it is an insult to the intelligence of the age to profess to believe that moral infirmities are*

transmitted to male descendants only. Heredity is sexless,

Had the white men of the South always felt that reverence for womanhood—that respect for virtue which the Commercial boasts; it would have no occasion to refer to Miss Wells as a "Saddle-Colored Sapphira." Miss Wells' *African* ancestors were black when they landed in America. If their descendants are "Saddle-Colored," are *they* at fault? Viewed in this light it is not singular that the paragraph referred to should have enraged the Commercial which champions that great section where men have been so richly endowed with licentiousness—and where women are above reproach.

In reply to the numerous strictures of the Northern press, we maintain that the result which have followed Miss Wells' English crusade, completely vindicate the wisdom of the course she has pursued in appealing to sentiment abroad. Americans become easily indignant when Russia oppresses her subjects, or Great Britain fails to attain to American ideals in her Irish affairs. They are enamoured of liberty everywhere except for American citizens upon American soil.

The Afro-American has endured patiently, silently. Had the government of the United States secured to him his constitutional rights by the exercise of its judicial and military powers, he would have no desire, or need, to appeal to other than American tribunals. He has appealed to these, again and again. In the North his appeal has been unheeded. In the South it has been spurned. He has failed in every quarter to arouse any response which could be shaped to remedial ends, but to the contrary has been told that he has wearied the American people with his importunities for justice and protection.

It is probable that the last appeal has been made to Americans. The Afro-American has found his audience beyond the seas, in a people who believe in fair play, a people sympathetic, generous and humane. He will be heard now in his own defense. He will speak the truth, regardless of prayers or threats. He will not seek revenge, but he will heed neither the pleadings of pity or patriotism. He seeks justice only, and will have it at whatever cost.