

CHAPTER VII

GARRISON THE PROPHET

Rejoice, and be exceeding glad, . . . for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.—St. Matthew, v:12.

The career of Garrison is in many ways typical of that class of men who in the days of the ancient Hebrews were called prophets. Brought up in a strictly conventional and orthodox manner, he was in his youth a Puritan of the Puritans, a firm believer in the infallibility of the Bible and the divine character of the church. Educated in a society which still remembered the days of the Revolution, he was taught to look upon that war as one ordained by heaven, and upon American institutions as the embodiment of absolute justice. Gradually, however, doubts crept into his mind. He felt instinctively that physical combat was beneath the dignity of man. How then could wars be right? And how could governments which depend upon military power be righteous? Slavery was an evident fruit of coercion, the very *reductio ad absurdum* of it; and yet it was supported by the government, and by its

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fundamental law, the Constitution, and it was openly abetted and defended by the church. Was it possible to worship institutions which brought forth such harvests? By their fruits ye shall know them, and this fruit was rotten to the core. And he began to preach a crusade against coercion, and the government which enforced it, and the church which blessed it. Public opinion in Garrison's time, and to a lesser degree to-day also, was singularly alike in religious and political matters. The pope, a man, had been deposed on the one hand, and the Bible, a writing, set up in his place. The king, a man, had been dismissed on the other, and the Constitution, a writing, enthroned in his place. The infallibility of the pope had been transferred to the Bible, and the majesty of the king to the Constitution, and protestantism and democracy seemed destined to end in the worship of printer's ink. It was the old error which has always called forth the prophet to denounce it—the error of exalting the letter above the spirit. If protestantism and democracy have any meaning, they stand for freedom; and yet Garrison found them approving of military coercion, warfare and slavery. What was he to do? It was a hard wrench for him. It required many months for him to appreciate the true bearings of the situation, but when he once saw clearly that his

own standards of ethics were far higher than those of church and state, he took the part of the spirit against the letter, and of the living truth against the fossilized lie. And the result was that which no prophet has ever escaped. He was persecuted and hounded. He was called an infidel and blasphemer and Sabbath-breaker. He was accused of stirring up the people and stimulating insurrection among the slaves. But he stood firm, remembering the injunction to rejoice and be exceeding glad, for so had they persecuted the prophets which were before him.

Garrison was a prophet, too, in the character of his work. His denunciation of wrong was in the language of Isaiah and Amos; he had their fiery spirit and unmeasured tongue. It is easy to argue that this temper is unkind and unchristian, but I confess that I like it, when it has no personal intent. Take away the "woes" which Jesus pronounced against pharisaism and hypocrisy, and you leave his character enfeebled. Somehow a loving heart and strong language against evil can contrive to thrive together. And in private life Garrison was all kindness, devoted to his wife and children and friends, and in turn almost adored by them. Nor, so far as I know, did he ever use harsh words towards any man to his face, and if he erred in this respect

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occasionally in his writing, it was because he took the individual as the incarnation of a wrong. His personal geniality and benignancy among his acquaintances were so great that it seemed impossible that he was the man who could, when occasion demanded, thunder against wickedness in high places. There was no limit to his courage when attacking the evils of slavery. While at Baltimore he showed again and again his willingness to run any risk in stigmatizing the conduct of those who were engaged in the slave trade, if necessary by name; and one ruffian who threatened him, he invited to come and meet him.

He was free, too, from some of the common defects of reformers. There was nothing abnormal about him, except his philanthropy. As a boy he was active in sports, a good swimmer and skater. He sympathized heartily with the struggle of the Greeks for independence, and, having not yet formulated his belief in the immorality of war, he thought seriously of volunteering to fight in their behalf. His constitution was strong, and, so far from suffering from indigestion (which accounts for so much sour criticism of things as they are), he declared that he never knew that he had a stomach. And yet there was something of New England asceticism about him, for which I do not propose to apologize.

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The example of his father and of a brother who also died a drunkard naturally turned him against strong drink and the coercion of bad habits. He had little patience with smoking or loose or self-indulgent habits of any kind. One of his closest followers of a younger generation became in later years a disciple of Henry George and an advocate of equal rights in the raw material of the globe. Upon his first meeting with Mr. George, the great land reformer invited him into a beer-saloon to discuss the question with him, and the new recruit was shocked at the idea. Abolitionists of the true stripe looked upon the saloon as the gate of hell, and nothing else. But in movements of this kind, asceticism, the control of the appetites, the ascendancy of the mind above things, has its place, and so, too, does the easy-going acceptance of democratic manners with their sociability and joviality. It is foolish to quarrel with these differences of temperament, for they diversify human nature and make the world a pleasanter place to live in. Certainly it would lack a good deal of backbone if the Puritan ideals were lost for good and all. Garrison was a Puritan to the end, and one of the best specimens of that strong type.

And above all he was a prophet in his absolute merger of himself in his cause. Outside of it he had no personal ambition; and there

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is something which compels admiration in this attitude. Garrison belonged to a higher class of men than Lincoln, for he forgot himself in his desire for the triumph of what he regarded as the right. Lincoln's great achievements were incidents in a political career of the ordinary kind, the object of which was the promotion of his own interests and the assurance of his own advancement. As the world goes, we cannot criticize the ambitious lawyer, ready to argue any side of any case, nor the ambitious politician who wishes to be conspicuous; but such occupations and aspirations would be impossible to the noblest type of man. Garrison would at any moment have given his life and devoted his name to oblivion, if by so doing he could have helped his cause. And he was withal the most modest of men, even in conventions of his own people avoiding all appearance of dictation.

And the last mark of prophethood was also Garrison's. Despised and rejected of men during the active part of his career, insulted, mobbed, almost massacred, yet, even sooner than is usually the case, the children of those who would have stoned him have raised monuments to his memory. The fine statue on Commonwealth avenue, Boston, in the very city which once nearly murdered him, bears on its pedestal the words taken from

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the first editorial in the *Liberator*, "I am in earnest, . . . and I will be heard," and teaches a profound lesson to the young American as to the possibilities of the career of the prophet, even at this late day. What man walking the streets of Boston in the winter of 1831 would have guessed that the most important bit of contemporary history was being transacted in an obscure garret? Their minds were occupied with the doings of Congress and the dispatches from London and Paris, but the real motive power of society rarely shows itself on the surface. What man who looked on at the Boston mob of 1835 would have supposed for a moment that the hatless, coatless, bewildered victim of the crowd would conquer in the end, and that the men who were threatening him would live to be ashamed of their cause? I think it was Whittier who advised young men to seek for some just and despised cause and attach themselves to it. Even from the standpoint of worldly wisdom, this is not such bad advice. The man who loses his life finds it. Garrison might have become a leading editor, or author, or poet, or statesman (for he possessed the gifts necessary for these callings), and he might have left a comfortable fortune to his children; but it is doubtful if in any other way than as a prophet he would have won a monument for himself.