

## CHAPTER XII

### PRACTICAL LESSONS FROM GARRISON'S CAREER

God is our guide! No swords we draw,  
We kindle not war's battle-fires;  
By union, justice, reason, law,  
We claim the birthright of our sires.  
We raise the watchword, Liberty—  
We will, we will, we will be free!  
—“Songs of Freedom” (Anon.), page 80.

The abolition of American slavery was a single step in the long march of the human race toward freedom and a state of peaceful social equilibrium undisturbed by the coercion of man by man, and Garrison was one of the few great leaders of such movements who appreciated the wider significance of his particular task. Mankind has always been engaged in this march and perhaps always will be. We are taking such steps to-day, and the efforts to overthrow imperialism, militarism, plutocracy, monopoly and all other forms of trespass on the rights of man are further steps on the road of emancipation. We may well then find suggestions in the Abolition movement which

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will be of value in forming a diagnosis of present conditions and seeking a remedy for existing ills.

(1) And first of all, the Abolition movement was initiated by people of humble rank in society. Garrison began life as a cobbler's apprentice, and Lundy was a saddler. Even when the war broke out very few persons of prominence in society had taken their place among the Abolitionists, and those who did, such as Wendell Phillips and Edmund Quincy, were more or less ostracised and maligned. It was never "respectable" to be an Abolitionist. And it is true of all great social movements that their origin has been outside the pale of the "upper classes." Growth does not begin at the top, and a healthy, vigorous, just cause cannot in the nature of things be respectable at first; and just in proportion as it becomes respectable it loses its energy and single-mindedness. And this estrangement of the wealth and culture of the day gives rise to all sorts of libelous stories regarding reformers. Because Garrison and his followers were not in "society" they were looked upon by "society" with contempt, and it became easy to stigmatize them as infidels, blasphemers and Sabbath-breakers, and they were accused of endeavoring to foment insurrection among the slaves. Nothing was too vile or too criminal to be ascribed to them,

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although they were, in fact, the most religious and puritanic of people. It requires wise men, indeed, to look for contemporary history, not in the Capitol of Rome or of Washington, but in the manger and the attic.

(2) The churches were unanimously hostile to Garrison and the Abolitionists. Here and there a stray clergyman had the courage to support them, but it was at the risk of his reputation in his denomination, and most of these declared themselves only when the cause was far advanced. Garrison and many of his friends retorted by cutting loose from all ecclesiastical organizations. Their new wine was too strong for the old bottles, and it always is. The movement for peace to-day is obstructed by the churches just as emancipation was, and almost any church meeting is ready to shout for any war, however diabolical, in which its country may be engaged, while "infidels" and skeptics and materialists outside take up the cause of Christian brotherhood. Only last week (as I write) in Philadelphia (the City of Brotherly Love) the Pennsylvania Division, United Boys' Brigade of America, "in full military uniform," was reviewed by the State Commander and addressed by the reverend and distinguished chaplain. There were companies from the Presbyterian, Methodist, Congregational, Reformed, Episcopal, Reformed Episcopal

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and Moravian churches, and one company from Holy Trinity Church was named after the "Prince of Peace"! What would William Penn and the early Moravians have said of it? And Episcopal missionaries have introduced the Brigade into China, a nation which looks down on war. If lovers of peace leave the church as the Abolitionists did, they may find more Christianity without, and they will not be without good precedents for their action. There is something petrifying and deadening in institutionalism of all kinds, sacred and profane, and a church cannot in the very nature of things (except at its very inception) be a pioneer in social progress. We must be satisfied if it does not fall back too far in the rear. Institutions of learning fall into the same category, and their general influence during the years of anti-slavery activity was uniformly reactionary. Those who expect to find guidance now or at any time for the advance of society in the churches or universities are asking impossibilities and neglecting one of the plainest lessons of history—namely, that the priest and the professor are rarely in the van.

(3) Garrison and the Abolitionists found themselves arrayed perforce against the laws of the land, and these laws, as they were carried out by presidents, governors, legislators and judges, were among the chief

obstacles in the path of justice. Almost all the disturbances caused at anti-slavery meetings—frequently ending in personal violence and arson—had the scarcely disguised sympathy of the authorities, and the law was successfully invoked to spread slavery and return the fugitive slave. The leading statesmen and politicians of the country, with hardly a single exception, did what they could for slavery as long as they thought that cause advantageous to their fortunes. They had substituted paper and ink for their own consciences, and had forgotten the primitive obligations of man in the artificial claims of their oaths of office. This is surely inhuman. How does a bad law or a bad constitution differ from any other bad thing? We cannot throw the blame for our acts upon parchment and legal-cap. While a bill is on its passage in the legislature we do not hesitate to charge improper motives against the members, and we often detect log rolling and even bribery and corruption. But when the bill has triumphed over our protests and become a law we straightway fall down on our knees before it. Is not this fetish-worship? We talk of the majesty of the law as we used to talk of the majesty of our rulers; but the two absurdities must vanish together, for laws are not a whit more majestic than those who make and enforce them.

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There may be majesty in a good law or a good man, but there is none whatever in bad laws or bad men. It is, I say, nothing but fetish-worship—the same spirit which induced the Egyptians to sacrifice virgins to the rising Nile, and forced Jephthah to slay his daughter. Jephthah had taken an oath, just as the pro-slavery Northern judges and sheriffs had taken oaths; but it was an oath better honored in the breach than in the observance, and there are crimes worse than perjury of this kind. But there was really no dilemma for the honest man. He could at any moment resign his office. And oaths of office are medieval institutions which have unfortunately survived a great deal of similar rubbish. No bank president or railway director has to swear upon the Bible. Why should our political people be obliged to? The oath has no effect upon a bad man, while it can do nothing but worry a good one. We have got rid of the comparatively harmless folly of the coronation ceremony, and our judges and senators do not sit in solemn conclave to determine who shall carry the king's saltspoon or warming-pan in procession, but we have kept the most dangerous feature of all, the coronation oath—the oath of office. It was this oath taken by George III which cost his country dearly. We upset the tyranny of George III, but the tyranny

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of the oath still flourishes. The late Senator Tim Campbell, a local politician of some fame in the City of New York, once astounded the legislature by exclaiming during an acrimonious debate, "What is a little thing like the Constitution between friends?" There was a certain elemental truth in this statement. Laws and constitutions are made for men, and not men for laws and constitutions.

It is no wonder that Garrison denounced the legal obstacles which stood in his way. The Abolitionists were ready to revolt, passively, against the government, and the convention in Massachusetts demanded the secession of the North. The Constitution of the United States was a "covenant with death and hell," and there must be no "Union" with slave-holders. Thoreau issued a personal declaration of independence and seceded by himself from the Union. He filed the following document with the town clerk: "Know all men by these presents that I, Henry Thoreau, do not wish to be regarded as a member of any incorporated society which I have not joined."<sup>1</sup>

And Garrison had as little affection for the government as Thoreau. He would not even use it for his own ends, beyond petitioning it; and I suppose a man might address a petition

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<sup>1</sup>Essay on the Duty of Civil Disobedience.

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to any institution without any implied approval of it. He showed by the vitality of his own influence that the true life of a community is independent and outside of its governmental forms. God is not in the court or the legislature, but in the human soul, and courts and legislatures are the last places in which to find that vital spark. Take our national political system as it is centered in Washington, and the one crowning condemnation of it is that it is not the Real Thing. It is an empty illusion. Like the church of Sardis, it has a name that it lives, and is dead. There is a question that lies deeper than the one of good and evil, and right and wrong. It is the question of vitality. The Real Thing may be good or bad, but it must be alive. God is the Real Thing and the devil is the Real Thing, and in between all are the shams and make-believes and hypocrisies that make up such a large part of existence. And the indictment of Washington is that it is a sham. There is something great in the idea of ruling. Even with all the cruelties of Cortez and Genghis Khan, governing is a great thing—a crime, a sin, an evil, if you will—but still great. But Washington does not rule. It has a name that it rules, and is a slave. Once it was ruled by the oligarchy of Southern landholders and slave-holders. To-day it is ruled



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by the oligarchy of finance. Dig in Pennsylvania avenue and you will soon find Wall street under the surface.

Washington is not the Real Thing. Ostensible, nominal governments rarely are. At their inauguration they are genuine; but nations grow and their forms of government do not keep pace with their growth, and the power gradually passes into other channels and comes from other sources, and yet the old forms continue for ages after the life has left them and people still bow down to the empty shell. The Senate survived in Rome long after the Emperor had become an autocrat. He deferred to the Senate in form, as long as it made no effort to assert itself. And so to-day we speak of Senators from Colorado or New Jersey or Connecticut, and the President of the Senate so addresses them from the chair. If he expressed the truth he would recognize them as the Senators from this, that or the other railway combination, or from such and such a trust. The old power that lay in the people of the States has become absorbed by the vast aggregations of wealth, and the vitality has passed from our politics into our economics. A revolution as great as that of Rome has taken place, and the public does not yet appreciate the fact.

It is easy to say hard and true things of

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Wall Street, but that tortuous and narrow thoroughfare, with its skyscrapers overawing the forgotten church in the graveyard at its head, has after all the one supreme virtue—it is the Real Thing. No one can question its abundant vitality, its vigor, its dominating influence. It has drawn to itself the national center of gravity. It rules, and Washington is only one of its pawns. Wall Street leaves the gilded imitation organ pipes to the statesmen, and plays its own tunes behind them. It has the sense to prefer power to show. The men who rule in Wall Street do not care to have their names appear in the newspapers. They avoid it, and they leave the field of self-advertisement to the politicians who swim on the surface and carry out their behests.

Garrison was justified in his distrust of politicians and political methods, and in addressing himself to the living heart of the people and leaving their officeholders and their Capital alone. The atmosphere of Washington would have been stifling to such a frank and outspoken man, and he would have been out of his element in Congress. Service is higher than office. Someone must needs be President, but to live for others is the special gift of God. The real life of the nation is not to be found at Washington. That fair city, with its marble monuments, its memorial

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statues, recalling so many hatreds and slaughters of the past, and its well-kept lawns and drives, reminds me of nothing so much as a beautiful cemetery—another Woodlawn or Greenwood—where all is dead, with no manufactures, no agriculture, no natural industry—peopled by nothing but the mere effigies of men and women and hiding a festering mass of corruption. Such will never be the source of any true reform.

(4) The message of Garrison was based on abstract morality, and never deviated a hair's breadth one way or the other on account of any discrepancy between the exigencies of theory and those of practice. We have seen that there is sometimes such a discrepancy, but the greatest teachers have always risen above it. It was Lundy's attempt to postpone the immediate claims of emancipation which weakened his mission.

(5) Garrison's message, though springing from a spirit of unusual gentleness, which condemned all recourse to physical force, was couched in the stern and inexorable language of absolute truth. The greatest teachers have never been mealy-mouthed. The word of God is a two-edged sword, and one which should not be beaten into ploughshares. It was a true instinct which made Garrison severe as all the prophets have been severe.

These five attributes of the cause of Aboli-

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tion (and there are doubtless many others which escape me) are, I believe, the hallmarks of all great reforms. We recognize them at once in the history of the early Christians. They, too, counted among them "not many wise men, not many mighty, not many noble"; and the truth which they preached was hidden from the wise and prudent and revealed only unto babes. They, too, were charged with stirring up the people and turning the world upside down, with uttering blasphemy and breaking the Sabbath. Against them the chief priests and rulers, the Caiaphases and Herods and Pilates, presented an unbroken front. They also asserted principles with which for a time at least they justified no compromise, and their Founder, while setting them an example of suffering without lifting a hand in his defense, attacked the respectable sinners of the day in language which has not yet lost its sting.

We do well to question the value of any reform which does not unite these features. Any movement which has its source and chief support among the great and wealthy and learned, which is never accused of rousing the passions of the oppressed or of running counter to the prevailing religion of the time, which finds Church or State friendly and complaisant, which is ready to yield an

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iota in matters of principle, which hesitates to denounce where denunciation is due, and which finally places its reliance in anything but the power of truth—any such movement, if it be weighed, will be found wanting in the elements inherent in a great cause.

Are we ready to learn these lessons, and above all to adopt the methods of peace? They that take the sword shall perish by the sword. How many a brilliant cause has been brought to naught by the folly of its adherents, who sought to secure freedom by the weapons of tyranny! I have recently been reading the life of a reformer who was almost a non-resistant—a man of puritanic habits and simple life, and devoted with his whole soul to the cause of freedom and the people—and yet by yielding to the temptation of using violent means he made his name the object of universal execration. Robespierre was until two years or so before his death a consistent humanitarian and opponent of bloodshed. It is an historical fact that he resigned a lucrative judgeship because he was unwilling to pronounce a sentence of death. When the Revolution was well under way he proposed a bill for the abolition of capital punishment, and made a good fight for it. He refused to be a member of a court to try royalists, and served on a committee to protect the royal family during the September

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massacres. Mobs always filled him with abhorrence; he opposed the war with the allies and took every occasion to protest against a standing army on the highest moral grounds. He was noted as a friend of the Church, even when his friendliness compromised his power, and the Girondists attacked him on account of his belief in God. In debate he was particularly fair minded, insisting on obtaining a hearing for his opponents, and never indulging in personalities. It was with reluctance that he became a member of the terror committee, and he invariably avoided signing the guillotine lists when he could. Again and again he denounced the punishment of men for their opinions, no matter what those opinions might be. When the Gironde fell, it was Robespierre who saved the Right from extermination, and, in short, he was, as his last biographer, Hilaire Belloc, says, "A man by nature opposed to the Terror." Throughout these fearful times he maintained unaltered a dream of a perfect state in which all should be happy and all virtuous. And yet this man gradually gave his consent to the Terror in order that he might maintain his power and realize his vision, until, familiar with its frightful mien, he seized upon it as a means to his end, and was finally destroyed by the extremists whom he intended to kill. It is an

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undoubted fact that his plan was, after a few more days of slaughter, to abolish the revolutionary court and inaugurate his Rousseauan commonwealth; but it is idle to speculate as to what might have happened if he had not fallen so soon. To the end he remained true to some of his ideals. He would not consent to an insurrection in his own behalf until it was too late, nor when arrested would he accept release without the order of the Convention, for the Convention represented his adored People. But for this delay his life would have been saved.

How can such a career as Robespierre's be explained? With Garrison's faith in the unaided power of the right, he would have had a sure clue to follow. Without that faith no man is to be trusted in such an environment. It is difficult for us to imagine the effect of bloodthirsty surroundings; and yet have we not seen in South Africa and China and the Philippines equally striking examples of it? Robespierre became finally a conspicuous incarnation of all that he most hated, and he reached this point by adopting means which he knew were wrong, to gain an end in which he profoundly believed. He dreaded most of all to be left out of the stream of events—dropped on one side on account of his scruples, and consequently he plunged in, was sucked into the maelstrom, and died,

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having justly earned that reputation which of all others he would most have deprecated. If he had fallen before the trial of the King, or if he had remained true to his conscience and returned home when he found that he could no longer guide his country along the paths of peace, his name would have gone down in history with Garrison's as that of a benefactor of mankind.

When the time comes to make another distinct advance in that great movement towards justice of which the French Revolution and the anti-slavery agitation were episodes, shall we follow the lead of Robespierre or that of Garrison? It is quite possible that a revolution in America to-day would end as did that of 1789 in France. It will not do to pooh-pooh the idea as monstrous. Men who can shoot down prisoners and administer the water torture in the Orient might have no insuperable objection to the guillotine at home. In the case of some great industrial crisis within the next few years, when practically all workmen are idle, let us suppose that they begin to riot in many places at once, and call for the bread which they cannot earn. The ordinary machinery of commerce and of government has broken down. In the midst of the disorder a national convention is called and delegates flock to Washington, with the mutterings and threats of



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discontent and starvation in their ears. They would no longer be the futile politicians of ordinary elections—the absurd and ridiculous mannikins who now strut through the forms of legislation; but real representatives of the people, newly stirred to a consciousness of their needs. I fancy I could name a score of the delegates—men and women of the highest ideals and capacity. Such a representative body would be certain to compare favorably from the point of view of ability with the French Assembly, and it would come together with the same lofty aims and the same devotion to them. Would it end in the same carnival of horror? With the example of the peace-loving Robespierre before us it is impossible to scout the idea. The only safeguard against such a danger is the utter repudiation of all violent methods of reform. Once permit yourself to rely upon rifles and prisons, and the descent is easy to all kinds of cruelty and torture. The lesson of all history is that men are not to be trusted with the power of life and death over their fellows; and any revolution which claims for itself any such power carries in its bosom the seeds of a counter movement which will bring in again the supremacy of the party of reaction. The best mental exercise for reformers is to accustom themselves to the idea of dispensing with the use of physical

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force, and of commending their cause to the higher powers of influence, persuasion and truth.

And Garrison was the true prophet of such a peaceful method. He had the genuine spirit of reform which we might do well to accept from him as an inheritance. He was, indeed, to use his friend Quincy's words, uttered as early as 1838, "one of those rare spirits which heaven at distant periods sends upon the earth on holiest missions." He was, as all such men are, in advance of his time,—“too great . . . to be a representative man at present,” as Harriet Martineau declared, but, she added, “his example may raise up a class hereafter.” Such an example is indeed full of inspiration for those who see in the world around them many evils not altogether unrelated to those against which Garrison struggled so long and so faithfully. But wherever the cause of justice may call us, let us be careful to go in his spirit, for, as one of his fellow-workers truly said, “Non-resistance is the temper of mind in which all enterprises for humanity should be undertaken.”

