

## CHAPTER IV

# CONSTITUTION AND CONSCIENCE

Were you looking to be held together by lawyers?  
Or by an agreement on a paper? Or by arms?  
Nay, nor the world nor any living thing will so cohere.  
—WALT WHITMAN, "Drum-Taps."

The Constitution of the United States recognized the legality of slavery, and an idolatrous regard for that document and for the Union maintained by it between the States closed the eyes of many Americans to the iniquity of the institution. Webster was the high priest of this fetish-worship, and his miserable capitulation to the slave power was in part due to this false patriotism, and in part to his presidential aspirations. But he humiliated himself in vain. Even Lincoln, who knew that "if slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong," felt justified as late as August, 1862, in saying, "If I could save the Union without freeing any slaves I would do it; if I could save it by freeing all the slaves, I would do it; and if I could do it by freeing some and leaving others alone, I would also do that." Garrison never allowed the Con-

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stitutional argument to obscure the moral obligation. He frankly acknowledged that he preferred the dissolution of the Union to the recognition, express or implied, of slavery in any form. It is rather difficult to understand at this distant day why the people of the North were so anxious for union with States whose inhabitants visited upon them indiscriminately the most opprobrious epithets, and I am inclined to believe that the Southerners must have had more respect for the outspoken anathemas of Garrison than for the truckling subserviency of time-serving politicians and tradesmen. The non-resistant was more of a man than his fellow citizens who saw nothing wrong in war. "No Union with Slave-Holders" became his motto, and in 1844 he began to print it weekly at the head of the columns of the Liberator. The Constitution was now for him a "covenant with death and hell." The annexation of Texas in the teeth of the most solemn obligations, for the sole purpose of extending slavery over a territory in which it had been abolished, strengthened the feeling of hostility to the government among the Abolitionists, and the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law was almost more than they could bear. The South was steadily pursuing a policy which was bound to swell the Abolition ranks and to rouse the enmity of many

who had hitherto been friendly to them. In the light of history nothing could have been more futile than the course of their boasted statesmen. Even Boston could hardly stand the sight of a fugitive slave marching down to the wharf between files of soldiers to be returned to the questionable mercies of his master. Webster besought his State to "conquer her own prejudices," and declared that "anyone can perform an agreeable duty; it is not every man who can perform a disagreeable duty," a remark which measures the depth of Northern hypocrisy, and shows that on the whole the North was more contemptible, if not more wicked, than the South throughout these wretched years. President Fillmore disgraced his State, New York, by signing the Fugitive Slave Bill in 1850, although, if he had vetoed it, there was a chance of defeating it on its second passage. Six thousand Negroes at once fled from the miscalled free States across the border into Canada and found freedom on British soil. When Wendell Phillips and Theodore Parker addressed a mass-meeting at Faneuil Hall to protest against the return of a captured slave, Judge B. R. Curtis, who hoped to obtain the post of chief justice from the slave power, and was in fact one of the greatest of living jurists, urged the grand jury to indict them as "obstructing the process of the

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United States;" and that honorable body complied with his request. President Pierce, a New Hampshire man, ordered out the troops to make sure the delivery of the unfortunate captive. Congress, bent upon proving that it was as much enslaved to the slave-holders as the Negroes themselves, in obedience to its task-masters, swept aside the Missouri Compromise, and passed the Nebraska Bill, which opened to slavery a vast region which had been solemnly dedicated by the same body to freedom. True indeed were Whittier's lines:

And Law, an unloosed maniac, strong,  
Blood-drunken, through the blackness trod,  
Hoarse-shouting in the ear of God  
The blasphemy of wrong.

We may readily imagine the frame of mind in which these events left Garrison. At the 4th of July celebration of the Abolitionists at Framingham, Massachusetts, in 1854, he made an address in the open air, in the course of which he produced a copy of the Fugitive Slave Law, and setting fire to it, burned it to ashes. "And let all people say, Amen," he cried; and a shout of "Amen" went up from the vast crowd. Then he burned the decision of the commissioner ordering the surrender of a slave, and also the charge of Judge Curtis to the grand jury. "And let all the people say, Amen." Then

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he held up the Constitution of the United States, and declaring it to be the source and parent of the other atrocities, he committed it too to the flames. "So perish all compromises with tyranny, and let all the people say, Amen." And the audience again responded from their hearts, "Amen!" In 1857 he went so far as to take part in a State convention, called to urge the separation of the free from the slave States.

It must not be supposed that throughout these years the Abolitionists were less persecuted than formerly by their enemies. If public sentiment in some quarters was becoming more favorable to them, that very fact aroused the base passions of their opponents. In 1850 James Gordon Bennett, in the Herald, deliberately stirred up a mob to put down the anniversary meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society at New York. He described the speakers as "William H. Furness, of Philadelphia, white-man, from Anglo-Saxon blood; Frederick Douglass, of Rochester, black-man, from African blood; William Lloyd Garrison, of Boston, mulatto-man, mixed race; Wendell Phillips, of Boston, white-man, merely from blood." He added that "Garrison surpasses Robespierre and his associates," and borrowing his language apparently from a future generation, calls the members of the society "Abolition-

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ists, socialists, Sabbath-breakers and anarchists." The Globe quite distinctly advised the murder of Douglass. The mob assembled promptly, and although on the first day the firm dignity of the speakers held them at bay, the further continuance of the convention was rendered impossible. "Thus closed anti-slavery free discussion in New York for 1850," said the Tribune. Similar events occurred in Boston, and the crowd silenced Phillips himself in Faneuil Hall. Even after Lincoln's election, anti-slavery meetings were broken up by rioters in Boston, and on one occasion Phillips' life was for a time in danger. In Brooklyn Henry Ward Beecher had to be guarded by the police in Plymouth Church.