

CHAPTER V

THE CIVIL WAR

War is a condition of hate subsisting between persons, and peace is a condition of good-will subsisting between persons.

—ERASMUS.

Garrison's doctrine of non-resistance was put to the test throughout this period and to the end of the Civil War itself, but he never wavered. In 1856, during the early struggle for freedom in Kansas, Theodore Parker and Henry Ward Beecher had not hesitated to hold meetings in their churches with the object of raising money to buy rifles for the anti-slavery volunteers. Mr. Beecher said: "You might just as well read the Bible to buffaloes as to those fellows who follow Atchison and Stringfellow." Garrison expressed his emphatic dissent from this assertion. To class human beings as wild beasts was, he said, merely to adopt the theory which the slaveholders applied to their slaves. The "border ruffians" of Kansas were less blameworthy than their respectable backers. "Convince us that it is right to shoot anybody, and our perplexity would be

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to know where to begin—whom first to despatch as opportunity might offer. We should have to make clean work of the president and his cabinet”—and he goes on to enumerate various distinguished men who must be considered as accomplices.

We know not where to look for Christianity if not to its Founder, and taking the record of his life and death, of his teaching and example, we can discover nothing which even remotely, under any conceivable circumstances, justifies the use of the sword or rifle on the part of his followers; on the contrary, we find nothing but self-sacrifice, willing martyrdom (if need be), peace and good-will, and the prohibition of all retaliatory feelings enjoined upon all those who would be his disciples. When he said, “Fear not those who kill the body,” he broke every deadly weapon. When he said, “My kingdom is not of this world, else would my servants fight that I should not be delivered to the Jews,” he plainly prohibited war in self-defense and substituted martyrdom therefor. When he said, “Love your enemies,” he did not mean “kill them when they go too far.” When he said, while expiring on the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do,” he did not treat them as a “herd of buffaloes,” but as poor, misguided and lost men. We believe in his philosophy; we accept his instruction; we are thrilled by his example; we rejoice in his fidelity.

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Such was the argument of the man whom the churches, crying "Lord! Lord!" denounced as an infidel. It was in this very year that the Independent, one of the best known religious papers of the country, and on whose editorial board were such distinguished clergymen as Dr. Leonard Bacon and Dr. Storrs, called Garrison an infidel "of the most degraded class!"

When at last war became inevitable, Garrison deplored the martial spirit of many of the Abolitionists. "When the anti-slavery cause was launched," he said, "it was baptized in the spirit of peace."

We proclaimed to the country and the world that the weapons of our warfare were not carnal, but spiritual, and we believed them to be mighty through God to the pulling down even of the stronghold of slavery, and for several years great moral power accompanied our cause wherever presented. Alas! . . . We are growing more and more warlike, more and more disposed to repudiate the principles of peace. . . . Just in proportion as this spirit prevails, I feel that our moral power is departing and will depart. . . . I believe in the spirit of peace and in sole and absolute reliance on truth and the application of it to the hearts and consciences of the people. I do not believe that the weapons of liberty ever have been, or ever can be, the weapons of despotism. I know that

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those of despotism are the sword, the revolver, the cannon, the bombshell, and therefore the weapons to which tyrants cling and upon which they depend are not the weapons for me, as a friend of liberty. . . . Much as I detest the oppression exercised by the Southern slaveholder, he is a man, sacred before me. He is a man, not to be harmed by my hand nor with my consent. He is a man who is grievously and wickedly trampling upon the rights of his fellow-man; but all I have to do with him is to rebuke his sin, to call him to repentance, to leave him without excuse for his tyranny. He is a sinner before God—a great sinner; yet, while I will not cease reprobating his horrible injustice, I will let him see that in my heart there is no desire to do him harm,—that I wish to bless him here, and bless him everlastingly,—and that I have no other weapon to wield against him but the simple truth of God, which is the great instrument for the overthrow of all iniquity and the salvation of the world.

In speaking of John Brown after his raid at Harper's Ferry, he says:

Judging him by the code of Bunker Hill, we think he is as deserving of high-wrought eulogy as any who ever wielded sword or battle-axe in the cause of liberty; but we do not and we cannot approve any indulgence of the war spirit. John Brown has perhaps a right to a place by the side of Moses,

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Joshua, Gideon and David, but he is not on the same plane with Jesus, Paul, Peter and John.

But these principles of Garrison did not prevent him, whenever war was actually raging, from wishing success to those who fought on the side of liberty.

As an ultra-peace man, I am prepared to say: Success to every slave insurrection in the South and in every slave country.

I thank God when men who believe in the right and duty of wielding carnal weapons are so far advanced that they will take those weapons out of the scale of despotism and throw them into the scale of freedom. It is an indication of progress and a positive moral growth; it is one way to get up to the sublime platform of non-resistance; and it is God's method of dealing retribution upon the head of the tyrant. Rather than see men wearing their chains in a cowardly and servile spirit, I would, as an advocate of peace, much rather see them breaking the head of the tyrant with their chains. Give me, as a non-resistant, Bunker Hill and Lexington and Concord, rather than the cowardice and servility of a Southern slave plantation.

Garrison applied these rules to the Civil War, and gave his entire sympathy to the cause of the North, while disapproving altogether of the resort to arms. Although for some time after the election and inauguration of

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Lincoln the Abolitionists had reason to doubt his intentions with reference to slavery, and especially after he had summarily revoked the orders of General Fremont and General Hunter liberating the slaves in their respective military districts, still Garrison saw deeper than most of his fellow reformers, and almost from the first gave him his support. Lincoln's oath of office, indeed, obliged him to accept the Constitution, and to that extent he was not a free man or a free moral agent. Occupying this false position, he felt bound in his inaugural address indirectly to stigmatize John Brown's undertaking as the "greatest of crimes." He also insisted, in the same address, upon the rendition of fugitive slaves, and appealed to the oaths of members of Congress to sustain this obligation. Could any more striking example of the baneful effect of oaths be given than these passages which his oath extorted from the future Emancipator? He rose to a higher sense of his duties later when he told Congress in 1864 that "If the people should by whatever mode or means make it an executive duty to re-enslave such persons, another, not I, must be their instrument to enforce it." ✕ Resignation of office is surely the only course for an official who finds himself called upon to do something which offends his conscience. Garrison earnestly urged the renomination

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of Lincoln against the bitter opposition of Wendell Phillips, who always strangely misunderstood the President.

Now at last the virtues of the Abolitionists began to be generally recognized. In 1864 George Thompson, who nearly thirty years before had barely escaped violence from pro-slavery mobs, returned to America. He was given a public reception in Boston, with Governor Andrews in the chair, and at Washington a short time afterwards, he was invited by the House of Representatives to deliver a lecture in their hall. Garrison, too, was treated with great respect when he visited the national capital, and in the last month of the war, at the invitation of Secretary Stanton, he was present at the raising of the flag on Fort Sumter on the fourth anniversary of its capture. Dr. Cuyler, of Brooklyn, records that while he was standing with Garrison in the streets of Charleston, a band passed them playing "John Brown's Body." "Only listen to that in Charleston streets!" exclaimed Garrison, and they both broke into tears. The Negroes received him in a large church building, several thousand of them being crowded into it. One of them addressed him in an eloquent oration on behalf of his race and two little slave girls presented him with flowers. This occurred on the very morrow of Lincoln's death, the

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news of which had not yet arrived. One of the party present at Fort Sumter and Charleston has informed the present writer that it was most impressive to see the reverence with which the Negroes looked at Garrison, many of them touching his coat as if they expected virtue to come out of it.

When the adoption of the thirteenth amendment to the Constitution, declaring the abolition of slavery, was assured, Garrison made up his mind to bring the Liberator to a close and to retire from the various anti-slavery societies. Their work was indeed ended, the mass of the population had caught up to them, and it was absurd now to pretend to any exclusive virtue. Many of the Abolitionists were incensed at his course, and insisted on keeping up the skeleton of their organization for several years; but the life had left them, and their total lack of influence proved how wise Garrison's action had been. He set up the last paragraph of his paper himself in December, 1865, and republished in the last issue the prophetic salutatory of thirty years before. Not one penny of gain had he to show for this lifetime of service.