

WHAT I OWE TO GARRISON

By LEO TOLSTOI

(A Letter to V. Tchertkoff) *

I thank you very much for sending me your biography of Garrison.

Reading it, I lived again through the spring of my awakening to true life. While reading Garrison's speeches and articles I vividly recalled to mind the spiritual joy which I experienced twenty years ago, when I found out that the law of non-resistance—to which I had been inevitably brought by the recognition of the Christian teaching in its full meaning, and which revealed to me the great joyous ideal to be realized in Christian life—was even as far back as the forties not only recognized and proclaimed by Garrison (about Ballou I learned later), but also placed by him at the foundation of his practical activity in the emancipation of the slaves.

My joy was at that time mingled with bewilderment as to how it was that this great Gospel truth, fifty years ago explained by

* A Short Biography of William Lloyd Garrison, by V. Tchertkoff and F. Holah. London: The Free Age Press, 1904.

Garrison, could have been so hushed up that I had now to express it as something new.

My bewilderment was especially increased by the circumstance that not only people antagonistic to the progress of mankind, but also the most advanced and progressive men, were either completely indifferent to this law or actually opposed to the promulgation of that which lies at the foundation of all true progress.

But as time went on it became clearer and clearer to me that the general indifference and opposition which were then expressed, and still continue to be expressed—pre-eminently amongst political workers—towards this law of non-resistance are merely symptoms of the great significance of this law.

"The motto upon our banner," wrote Garrison in the midst of his activity, "has been from the commencement of our moral warfare 'OUR COUNTRY IS THE WORLD; OUR COUNTRYMEN ARE ALL MANKIND.' We trust that it will be our only epitaph. Another motto we have chosen is, 'UNIVERSAL EMANCIPATION.' Up to this time we have limited its application to those who in this country are held by Southern taskmasters as marketable commodities, goods and chattels, and

implements of husbandry. Henceforth we shall use it in its widest latitude—the emancipation of our whole race from the dominion of man, from the thralldom of self, from the government of brute force, from the bondage of sin, and the bringing it under the dominion of God, the control of an inward spirit, the government of the law of love. . . .”

Garrison, as a man enlightened by the Christian teaching, having begun with the practical aim of strife against slavery, very soon understood that the cause of slavery was not the casual temporary seizure by the Southerners of a few millions of negroes, but the ancient and universal recognition, contrary to the Christian teaching, of the right of coercion on the part of certain people in regard to certain others. A pretext for recognizing this right has always been that men regarded it as possible to eradicate or diminish evil by brute force, i.e., also by evil. Having once realized this fallacy, Garrison put forward against slavery neither the suffering of slaves, nor the cruelty of slaveholders, nor the social equality of men, but the eternal Christian law of refraining from opposing evil by violence, i.e., of “non-resistance.” Garri-

son understood that which the most advanced among the fighters against slavery did not understand: that the only irrefutable argument against slavery is the denial of the right of any man over the liberty of another under any conditions whatsoever.

The Abolitionists endeavored to prove that slavery was unlawful, disadvantageous, cruel; that it depraved men, and so on; but the defenders of slavery in their turn proved the untimeliness and danger of emancipation, and the evil results liable to follow it. Neither the one nor the other could convince his opponent. Whereas Garrison, understanding that the slavery of the negroes was only a particular instance of universal coercion, put forward a general principle with which it was impossible not to agree—the principle that under no pretext has any man the right to dominate, i.e., to use coercion over his fellows. Garrison did not so much insist on the right of negroes to be free as he denied the right of any man whatsoever, or of any body of men, forcibly to coerce another man in any way. For the purpose of combating slavery he advanced the principle of struggle against all the evil of the world.

This principle advanced by Garrison was

irrefutable, but it affected and even overthrew all the foundations of established social order, and therefore those who valued their position in that existing order were frightened at its announcement, and still more at its application to life; they endeavored to ignore it, to elude it; they hoped to attain their object without the declaration of the principle of non-resistance to evil by violence, and that application of it to life which would destroy, as they thought, all orderly organization of human life. The result of this evasion of the recognition of the unlawfulness of coercion was that fratricidal war which, having externally solved the slavery question, introduced into the life of the American people the new—perhaps still greater—evil of that corruption which accompanies every war.

Meanwhile the substance of the question remained unsolved, and the same problem, only in a new form, now stands before the people of the United States. Formerly the question was how to free the negroes from the violence of the slaveholders; now the question is how to free the negroes from the violence of all the whites, and the whites from the violence of all the blacks.

The solution of this problem in a new

form is to be accomplished certainly not by the lynching of the negroes, nor by any skilful and liberal measures of American politicians, but only by the application to life of that same principle which was proclaimed by Garrison half a century ago.

The other day in one of the most progressive periodicals I read the opinion of an educated and intelligent writer, expressed with complete assurance in its correctness, that the recognition by me of the principle of non-resistance to evil by violence is a lamentable and somewhat comic delusion which, taking into consideration my old age and certain merits, can only be passed over in indulgent silence.

Exactly the same attitude towards this question did I encounter in my conversation with the remarkably intelligent and progressive American Bryan. He also, with the evident intention of gently and courteously showing me my delusion, asked me how I explained my strange principle of non-resistance to evil by violence, and as usual he brought forward the argument, which seems to everyone irrefutable, of the brigand who kills or violates a child. I told him that I recognize non-resistance to evil by violence because, having lived seventy-five years, I

have never, except in discussions, encountered that fantastic brigand, who, before my eyes, desired to kill or violate a child, but that perpetually I did and do see not one but millions of brigands using violence towards children and women and men and old people and all the laborers in the name of the recognized right of violence over one's fellows. When I said this my kind interlocutor, with his naturally quick perception, not giving me time to finish, laughed, and recognized that my argument was satisfactory.

No one has seen the fantastic brigand, but the world, groaning under violence, lies before everyone's eyes. Yet no one sees, nor desires to see, that the strife which can liberate man from violence is not a strife with the fantastic brigand, but with those actual brigands who practise violence over men.

Non-resistance to evil by violence really means only that the mutual interaction of rational beings upon each other should consist not in violence (which can be only admitted in relation to lower organisms deprived of reason) but in rational persuasion; and that, consequently, towards this substitution of rational persuasion for coercion all those should strive who desire to further the welfare of mankind.

It would seem quite clear that in the course of the last century, fourteen million people were killed, and that now the labor and lives of millions of men are spent on wars necessary to no one, and that all the land is in the hands of those who do not work on it, and that all the produce of human labor is swallowed up by those who do not work, and that all the deceits which reign in the world exist only because violence is allowed for the purpose of suppressing that which appears evil to some people, and that therefore one should endeavor to replace violence by persuasion. That this may become possible it is necessary first of all to renounce the right of coercion.

Strange to say, the most progressive people of our circle regard it as dangerous to repudiate the right of violence and to endeavor to replace it by persuasion. These people, having decided that it is impossible to persuade a brigand not to kill a child, think it also impossible to persuade the working men not to take the land and the produce of their labor from those who do not work, and therefore these people find it necessary to coerce the laborers.

So that, however sad it is to say so, the only explanation of the non-understanding of

the significance of the principle of non-resistance to evil by violence consists in this, that the conditions of human life are so distorted that those who examine the principle of non-resistance imagine that its adaptation to life and the substitution of persuasion for coercion would destroy all possibility of that social organization and of those conveniences of life which they enjoy.

But the change need not be feared; the principle of non-resistance is not a principle of coercion but of concord and love, and therefore it cannot be made coercively binding upon men. The principle of non-resistance to evil by violence, which consists in the substitution of persuasion for brute force, can be only accepted voluntarily, and in whatever measure it is freely accepted by men and applied to life—i.e., according to the measure in which people renounce violence and establish their relations upon rational persuasion—only in that measure is true progress in the life of men accomplished.

Therefore, whether men desire it or not, it is only in the name of this principle that they can free themselves from the enslavement and oppression of each other. Whether men desire it or not, this principle lies at the basis of all true improvement in