

CHAPTER VI

THE LABOR QUESTION

God speed the hour, the glorious hour,
 When none on earth
Shall exercise a lordly power
Nor in a tyrant's presence cower,
But all to Manhood's stature tower
 By equal birth!

—WILLIAM LLOYD GARRISON,
 "The Triumph of Freedom."

Garrison lived for thirteen years after the close of the war, and he continued to take an active interest in the freedmen, in woman's rights, in temperance, free trade and other reforms. He protested against the exclusion of the Chinese from America, believing that the yellow man is a brother as well as the black. "No suitable occasion for bearing peace and non-resistance testimonials was neglected" by him, as his biographers tell us. He opposed the introduction of military drill into the public schools, and his conversation so impressed a young Japanese student who was preparing himself in America for the army of his country that on his return home he refused to serve for conscience' sake, and was duly cast into prison.

It is not without regret that we must

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record Garrison's insensibility to the claims of the working classes outside the ranks of the slaves. Their condition was placed before him by a correspondent in 1875, but it did not appeal to him. He seemed to think that the ballot (which, by the way, he considered it wrong to make use of) was an all-sufficient remedy for their ills, and that the laboring man held his fate in his own hands. "You express the conviction," he adds, "that the present relation of capital to labor is 'hastening the nation to its ruin,' and that if some remedy is not applied it is difficult to see 'how a bloody struggle is to be prevented!' I entertain no such fears. Our danger lies in sensual indulgence, in a licentious perversion of liberty, in the prevalence of intemperance, and in whatever tends to the demoralization of the people." In the same strain might a Southern planter have answered Lundy in the twenties! Garrison was only a fallible mortal after all, but surely he had already deserved well enough of his kind for us to overlook the natural conservatism of his old age. It is not everyone that can preserve to the end the freshness and alertness of vision of his youth, a quality which distinguished Wendell Phillips from his colleagues and outweighed the trivial defects of his character.

The workingman, it should be said in this

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connection, at one time at least had shown his devotion to the cause of the slave, and placed all Abolitionists under lasting obligations. In 1863 a friend writing to Garrison from England says:

The working classes also have proved to be sound to the core, wherever their opinion has been tested. Witness the noble demonstration of Manchester operatives the other day, when three thousand of these noble sons of labor (many of whom were actual sufferers from the cotton famine) adopted by acclamation an address to President Lincoln sympathizing with his proclamation. A friend of mine who was present on the occasion tells me that the heartiness and enthusiasm of the workingmen was something glorious; that he heard them say to one another that they would rather remain unemployed for twenty years than get cotton from the South at the expense of the slave. Mr. Thompson has been in other parts of Lancashire, and the meetings he has addressed have been attended with the same results. Our experience in London has been equally satisfactory. It would have done you good if you had . . . attended the great meeting of the working classes which we held on the 31st of December—the eve of freedom.

Mr. Thompson himself corroborated this account in a letter written a month later:

On New Year's Day I addressed a crowded assembly of unemployed operatives

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in the town of Heywood, near Manchester, and spoke to them for two hours about the slaveholders' Rebellion. They were united and vociferous in the expression of their willingness to suffer all the hardships consequent upon a want of cotton, if thereby the liberty of the victims of Southern despotism might be promoted. All honor to the half million of our working population in Lancashire, Cheshire and elsewhere, who are bearing with heroic fortitude the grievous privations which your war has entailed upon them! The four millions of slaves in America have no sincerer friends than the lean, palefaced idle people, who are reconciled to their meager fare and desolate homes by the thought that their trials are working out the deliverance of the oppressed children of your country. Their sublime resignation, their self-forgetfulness, their observance of law, their whole-souled love of the cause of human freedom, their quick and clear perception of the merits of the question between North and South, and their appreciation of the labor question involved in the "irrepressible conflict," are extorting the admiration of all classes of the community and are reading the nation a valuable lesson.