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# William Lloyd Garrison

by Eugene V. Debs

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Professor Goldwin Smith has written and published an essay, "founded on the story of Garrison's life, as told by his children."<sup>1</sup>

Garrison has received the title of "The Moral Crusader," and he earned it. He sought the extirpation of human slavery in the United States. He was content with nothing short of the utter extinction of the national wrong.

We have no purpose in view in referring to Prof. Smith's book, except to magnify the work of agitators, crusaders in a righteous cause.

Garrison's mission was the abolition of African slavery, chattel slavery, a wrong beginning in 1620 by the sale of a score of African savages, and continued for more than two centuries, growing into the social, political, and industrial life of the nation, until its annihilation required the bloodiest war that ever afflicted the earth.

It is a matter of little consequence whether the author of the book treats his subject in a way to command universal approval or whether it falls below such a coveted standard. The real theme is Garrison as an agitator — a man who sought to overcome a wrong, which, when he began his crusade, was esteemed by millions as one of those evils that should be let "severely alone." When Garrison attacked slavery the penalty was contumely in the most aggravated sense of the term.

Much is said nowadays about "public opinion." When Garrison demanded the abolition of the African — the negro slaves — in the United States, "public opinion," to an extent a defying exaggeration, was against him. He had no support from church or press, except to an extent too limited to command any respect whatever.

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<sup>1</sup> Goldwin Smith, *The Moral Crusader, William Lloyd Garrison: A Biographical Essay, Founded on "The Story of Garrison's Life Told By His Children."* New York: Funk and Wagnalls Co., 1892.

He was universally ostracized, denounced as a vagarist, a lunatic, a blasphemer, a creature whom to insult and assault was in the interest of good society, the peace and welfare of the country. But Garrison was not intimidated. His courage was always equal to the demand. He had that force within him that may be likened to the pulsating engine of an ocean steamer that makes steady headway to its destined port, though winds and waves and tides interpose. He believed he was right, and no matter how fierce the storm, and regardless of obstacles, he pursued undeviatingly his course.

Says a review:

“It was of immense importance that the message he felt himself called to deliver to his countrymen and to the world should be delivered by one who felt its meaning as he felt it. That message was the infinite wrong of slavery. It was to ears unconsciously or willfully deafened that his ringing voice was addressed in season and out of season, without ceasing, without modulation of the piercing note, over and over again. If the occasion were inappropriate, so much the better; the interruption would not be ignored. If the hearers were angered, again so much the better; this wrath would be made to serve the cause. If the church were shocked, still another advantage, for the church, far more than now, was the center of social and intellectual, as well as mural life, and to stir the church-goers was to stir the community.”<sup>2</sup>

In this we have a picture of the “moral crusader.” Anyone can enlarge it to suit their ideas, but no man has the power now, in the light of events, to belittle it. The fame of Garrison is secure.

Following chattel slavery, the nation is called upon to contemplate another form of slavery. It is not chattel slavery, nor negro slavery — and yet, it is a form of slavery, a form of poverty and degradation, of dependence, of hunger and squalor that has brought to the front a host of agitators, crusaders who are earnestly seeking to modify conditions which are in multiplied thousands of instances worse than those in which Garrison found the negro slaves of the South, for, generally, they were well fed, clothed, and sheltered.

The agitators who go forth to plead the cause of labor against oppression are meeting opposition, in many regards similar to that which confronted Garrison.

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<sup>2</sup> The source of this quotation can not be traced.

The press has maligned them and the vile work still goes forward. The church, spasmodically, here and there discusses labor topics, but in the aggregate; its endorsement is without value, chiefly because the church in the great centers of population is as much dependent upon capital as Rockefeller's Standard Oil Trust. The school and the college take no interest in labor questions, because DDs and LLDs, MAs, BAs, and PhDs are not students of labor problems upon which the welfare of society depends.

Capital, now, as in the days of Garrison, exerts its mighty power to silence agitators and perpetuate bondage. But in spite of such opposing forces, labor agitators are making headway. These men are exhibiting courage and demonstrating that their appeals are arousing workingmen to a proper sense of the situation, and these are cheering evidences that in thousands of instances beyond the limits of organized labor, hearts have been touched, consciences quickened, and judgment redeemed from the shackles of prejudice, to the extent that in the halls of Congress men of national renown do not hesitate to espouse the cause of labor.

The demand is for a greater number of labor crusaders — bolder and more determined than any that have appeared, men who, though maligned and often defeated are never discouraged, but return to the attack with increased energy and defiance. Men who, like Scott's veterans in their march from Vera Cruz, grasped

“Their muskets and their trusty blades,  
In noonday light and midnight shades,  
With steady step marched toward the clouds —  
Their war-shouts, ‘Victory or shrouds.’”<sup>3</sup>

The right triumphs by virtue of agitation. Moses and Joshua, the prophets and the apostles, were all moral agitators and crusaders, and that was the charge the Pharisees brought against Jesus of Nazareth, because his preaching swept away the dead past, and pointed out possibilities for the poor, which startled the world, and never more than now.

*Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport*

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<sup>3</sup> Source unknown.