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THE NEW REVOLUTION:

A SPEECH

BEFORE THE

AMERICAN ANTI-SLAVERY SOCIETY,

AT THEIR

ANNUAL MEETING IN NEW YORK,

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BY

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SPEECH OF REV. T. W. HIGGINSON.

MR. CHAIRMAN, AND LADIES AND GENTLEMEN :

I supposed, until within a few moments, that I was to follow Mr. Garrison in speaking. It is the next most honorable thing to that, to come at his word of command. There is an old Greek proverb which says, It is an honor to be a patriot; it is an honor even to come when a patriot calls. A patriot has called me, and I have come. It is not without meaning or consideration that I select that name for our great leader. It is not merely because, in the words of the resolutions, this Society has but one standard of patriotism—the slave. But I have high authority for the epithet which I choose; for it was the leader of the Republican party in this nation, its great manager, its most skilful wire-puller, who, in the best speech he ever made—it is Henry Wilson of whom I am speaking—at THE LIBERATOR festival, six years ago, after boasting of having read THE LIBERATOR for twelve years, and attributing to its teachings the greater part of his own love of freedom, ended by choosing out of our friend's virtues to extol, not his truthfulness, not his courage, not his zeal, but the "patriotism" of the disunionist, Mr. Garrison. I have, therefore, high political authority for what I say.

I stand here upon this platform with pleasure, for two reasons. The first is this: We hear it said every day, that the Abolitionists of the American Anti-Slavery Society are stern, narrow, sectarian, illiberal, intolerant of any man or of any opinion which does not fully coincide with them or

theirs. I stand here a living witness of the falsehood of the charge. From the moment when first, in an obscure country parish of New England, I ventured to peep and mutter upon the subject of American Slavery, the support, the unfailing friendship, of the Abolitionists around me has been mine. Never agreeing with them wholly, never asked to agree with them wholly, never accepting that special dogma of the interpretation of the Constitution, which is supposed to be the narrow standard by which they try all virtues, I have always found from them a sympathy more than my deserts, a friendliness which I never earned. I could not in words, perhaps, refute the charge of illiberality against them ; but it is refuted by my standing here.

I have another reason for being here. I look in vain throughout the nation for another place, to find men and women who see slavery as it is, and in its full strength. I have co-operated with political abolitionists all my life ; I may still co-operate with them, if they will be kind enough to pass by my door. I have co-operated all my life with anti-slavery clergymen also. But I have looked in vain for a body of men who understand slavery in its depth, except the Abolitionists of this Anti-Slavery Society. With all others, it is a superficial thing. Every man who has been in Republican meetings knows it, if he himself knows slavery as it is. Every man who has been in the habit of talking anti-slavery with those who talk it loudly and habitually in the streets and the caucuses, knows the shallowness of their perception of this giant evil. A young New Yorker whom I met last year, in a foreign country, told me he was an Abolitionist. 'I am from America ; I am from New York ; of course I am an Abolitionist,' said he ; 'but then I am not an ultra Abolitionist, like Seward and Greeley.' (Laughter.) Well, we have come here among a class of men also not ultra Abolitionists, *like* Seward and Greeley ; of quite a different stamp ; but Seward and Greeley are ultra Abolitionists in their manner, in their earnestness, in their fidelity,—ultra Abolitionists compared with the mass of the Republican party. The mass

of the Republican party have only begun to open their eyes to the grasp that slavery has taken upon the nation. The great number of Republican speakers see slavery, after all, as a trivial evil compared with its reality. Of course they see, for he must be blind who does not see, that it is the first political question before the nation, simply because there is no other. It needs no insight to see that slavery is more important than the bank or the tariff, because the tariff is settled, and so is the bank. They are no questions at all. They paint slavery, therefore, as the first question before the nation; they paint the Slave Power as something strong indeed, but not colossal; powerful indeed, but not frightful. They think it is a demon, but that it is a kind of demon that goes out, after all, very easily by prayer and fasting,—the prayer of three thousand Yankee clergymen, and the fasting from the loaves and fishes, of the Republican party, for four years more. (Laughter.)

They do not see it, they never have seen it, as it is. This very morning, I read in an able Republican journal, the statement that, after all, however it may have seemed in times past, the Slave Power is 'a weak thing,' when you come to look it in the face. 'A weak thing,' Mr. Chairman? If the power that has governed this nation since its formation, that has for half a century elected every President, dictated every Cabinet, controlled every Congress, the power that has demoralized the religion of the nation, and emasculated its literature, the power that outwitted Clay and stultified Webster, the power that has ruled as easily its Northern creditors as its Northern debtors, the power that at this moment stands with all the patronage of the greatest nation of the world in its clutches, and with the firmest financial basis in the world—so George Peabody says—beneath its feet—if this power be weak, where on the wide earth will you look for any thing strong? Weakness? Why, slavery is king; king *de facto*. It is as strong now, as it was before the thirteen hundred thousand freemen rallied to the support of John C. Fremont. It is as strong now as it was,

when Fremont was only known as the explorer of the Rocky Mountains, and the millionaire of California. It is absolute in its strength before us to-day. It knows the folly of those who think it weak, and it laughs at them. What does it fear? It has forgotten God, and there are only two things in the universe that it does fear, and those are the devil and William Lloyd Garrison. Out in Kansas, my brilliant friend, Gen. Jas. H. Lane, was making one of his characteristic speeches to the people, and he wanted words to describe the position of the two leaders of Kansas; for Kansas, like Rome of old, has two consuls, one for war, and one for peace. He characterized the attitude of the Border Ruffians towards Charles Robinson and himself by saying, 'The Missourians hate Jim Lane as they hate the devil; Charles Robinson they hate'—and he paused to think of something that the Missourians hated worse than the devil, and said,—'Charles Robinson they hate as they hate virtue;' and every body agreed that it was the best description of the men ever given. The Missourians of Washington, the Missourians of the South, have the same twin hostility, and it is equally well deserved. They know whom they have to fear.

Mr. Chairman, I began by saying that I never had accepted the opinion which prevails on this platform of the character of the Constitution. A few words only upon that. I never have held, and I hope I never shall hold, that the Constitution, or any thing else, is to be interpreted in a pro-slavery manner, if you can possibly find any other sense in it. I never have held, and I trust I never shall hold, that it is to be interpreted by what its framers meant to put in it, but only, like all other legal instruments, by what they succeeded in getting in. Some regard it as strongly pro-slavery, and others as strongly anti-slavery, and others as Talleyrand regarded the French Constitution, when he said it meant nothing, and never would mean anything, because he had made it himself on purpose. (Laughter.) I think that hits the nail upon the head. But there is one fixed rule in the interpretation of documents, where liberty is concerned,

and that is, to put in liberty wherever there is a loophole to cram it in by. The authority best adapted to our purpose, so far as I know, is the very memorable decision rendered in the case where Shylock was the plaintiff, Portia the judge, and William Shakspeare the reporter of the court. If there be in that Constitution any space left, if there be an ounce of flesh or a drop of blood, if there be the drachm of a scruple, or a scruple itself, where you can force an anti-slavery meaning into it, you have a right to put that meaning in, and every honest man will justify you in the effort. The mightiest intellect, or the profoundest moral sense, for such a purpose as that, may narrow itself down to microscopic investigation. It may pass through as delicate a fissure as that which held Ariel in the cloven pine, if by so doing it can transform one slave into a freeman.

It is only a question of will, whether it shall be done or not. No instrument, framed as the Constitution was, is without the opportunities which that gives. I do not care where the loophole is found ; there may be one in the word 'law ;' there may be another in the word 'due.' I do not care how small it is ; give us a Supreme Court that is favorable to liberty, and the Constitution is an anti-slavery document to-morrow. (Applause.)

But the difficulty lies elsewhere, not in the law, but in the fact. It is not a question of the meaning of words, as yet. I do not know of any question that this nation can discuss, so utterly unimportant for all practical purposes as the question of the meaning of the Constitution of the United States. It is a dead letter. It is a piece of parchment riddled through and through. Where is the man who obeys it? Where is the Southerner who obeys it? Where is the Northern Republican who means to obey it, if the fugitive slave takes refuge in his house? Nobody means to obey it. I see no difference of practical importance between Wendell Phillips and Gerritt Smith. One thinks the Constitution is pro-slavery ; the other thinks the *existing interpretation* of the Constitution is pro-slavery. Each of them admits that it will

cost a revolution to get either the Constitution or its interpretation set aside. Both of them believe in carrying that revolution to the point of the bayonet, if necessary. Where is the difference as a question of fact? Nothing. All the intellect, all the genius, all the learning ever expended upon the point of Constitutional interpretation, are not worth, in the practical solution of the slavery question, a millionth part so much as the poorest shot that ever a fugitive slave fired at his master—not worth the thrust of the dagger that made Margaret Garner's child a free being in Heaven, instead of a slave upon earth. The one is a word; the other is a fact. The one is a theory; the other is one of those stern realities that revolutionize nations, and upon which Constitutions only wait.

The question of slavery is a stern and practical one. Give us the power, and we can make a new Constitution, or we can re-interpret the old one. How is that power to be obtained? By politics? Never. By revolution, and that alone. There is the issue, Mr. Chairman. That is what makes men Disunionists, Constitution or no Constitution. It is a question of fact. I cannot bear to waste time in debating the Constitution, because I see that while the Constitution is being talked about, there is a crack in the nation that is growing wider, and wider, and wider apart. When I look at this fact, I do not care for the theory. We talk about a Constitution and a nation; but we are not a nation; we are two nations, whom this frail paper bond has vainly tried to weld together into one. We are diverging more and more every day. Every thing separates us. Birth, tradition, laws, education, social habits, institutions—every thing separates us, nothing brings us nearer together. The reason why Free-State men and Slave-State men hate each other in Kansas, is because all the institutions of their respective nations have for years been training them to hate each other. When they come face to face, it is only the old hostility breaking out again. It is not only the difference in birth, although still the Puritan stock remains upon the one side, and the Cava-

lier stock upon the other. It is not merely that in Kansas you see on the one side the traces of the Puritan, softened and improved, and upon the other the traces of the Cavaliers, degraded and deteriorated; it is not that even now in Kansas, as during the English civil wars, you may know one side from the other, because the one side wears long hair, and the other does not; because when you meet a party there with long hair, you may suspect they are Missourians, and when you meet a party with short hair, you may know that they are Round-heads, Puritans, Yankees; it is not that alone, strange though that coincidence is, after the lapse of centuries; but it is because something stronger than parties is separating them.

Slaveholders and Freemen are always two nations. There is no power or force that can unite them. There are no two nations in Europe so absolutely antagonistic as the Free-State and the Slave-State men of this Union. All that any town in Massachusetts or New York asserts by its institutions,—that every settlement in South Carolina, every plantation in Virginia denies. How are you to unite these opposing forces? By a Union and a Constitution? Read Olmstead's admirable book on Texas, and you will find that the young New Yorker, travelling among the American settlements of Texas, felt himself a stranger; but, coming into a German settlement, he felt himself among kindred and friends. Germany, far off, dreamy, visionary, poetical Germany, was nearer in national sympathy to the young New Yorker, than the Texans and the Mississippians, who called themselves his brothers. I knew a young man born in South Carolina and educated in Massachusetts. He travelled abroad, and visited half the nations of Europe. When he came back, he entered, for the first time in eight years, his own birth-place, Charleston, S. C.; and he told me that he had not, at Vienna, or Rome, or Paris, the sense of strangeness that he had there. He was a foreigner in his birth-place, because his birth-place was South Carolina, and Massachusetts trained him. Tell me, if you can, in the history

of the world, of a nation with such antagonisms as that within its bosom, which has permanently held together.

It is not a question of this or that measure. It is a question of permanent, absolute, irreconcilable distinctions, growing with the growth of the people, showing themselves more and more every year, since every year slavery is more truly slavery, and freedom is more truly freedom. I ask nothing more than the evidence I see with my own eyes of this antagonism, to show me that politicians dream in vain of permanently keeping the Union together. But why should the Union be kept together? What are the objects, the arguments, the advantages? I see the weakness of this Union the moment any man undertakes to defend it, because I see the poverty of the arguments he uses. He asks, for instance, how are you going to dissolve the Union, not seeing that it is dissolving itself. Every time a blow is struck, in Kansas or in Washington, it splits further apart. We must separate, when we have learned to hate each other.

They ask whether you are not deserting the slave by dissolving the Union. The best anti-slavery lecturer I know of upon that point, is one Thomas H. Benton, of St. Louis. If he does not satisfy the people of the Northern States that it is best for them to dissolve the Union, I do not know who will. He came to Worcester the week after we had the Disunion Convention there. A great many people had shaken their heads at that Convention. The argument had been potent with some uninstructed or hasty persons, that if the Union were dissolved, it would be the desertion of the slave, and a baseness unworthy of us. Sir, Mr. Benton settled all that in about five minutes, before one of the largest audiences ever collected in Worcester; and he settled it by the very argument with which he undertook to produce quite a different result. He stood before the people of that city, and tried to startle them by the consequences that would flow from a separation between these States. Said he, (his eyes opening wide, and his face growing longer and longer,) 'If you dissolve this Union, friends and fellow-citizens,

twenty slaves will run away where one does now'; and a general chuckle of satisfaction ran through the audience. Thinking himself misunderstood, and wishing to deepen the impression, he said, 'If you dissolve the Union, you will bring Canada practically down to the line of Maryland and Virginia;' and when he looked for sorrow and mourning, the house shook with applause.

'She went to the undertaker's to buy him a coffin,
And when she got back, the poor dog was laughing.'

Every body agreed that if we had driven the nail of Disunion, he had clinched it. How idle is it for us, standing here at the North—and I use now the argument familiar to the conservative press—to suppose that we can be better acquainted with the subject of slavery, than Thomas H. Benton.

All the arguments have the same weakness. The real opposition to disunion is a vague, an indeterminate opposition. People shrink from dissolving the Union, because they do not know what the result will be. They see the danger now; they shrink from incurring that which they do not understand. They are about on a level with the old stage-coach driver in England, who had his private opinion of the superiority of stages to rail-cars, 'There are as many accidents, in proportion to the travel, upon the stages as upon the railroads;' it was said to him. 'Yes, said old Weller, 'but that is not the thing; don't you see the difference; if you are upset in a stage coach, and find yourself flying over a hedge somewhere, there you are; but if the train runs off the track, and smashes to atoms, *where are you?*' That is about as clear a view as most persons have, of the effect of dissolving the Union. It is a vague impression, a dim apprehension, and we would rather bear those ills we have, than 'fly to others that we know not of.'

Others, sheltering themselves behind the same uncertainty, and the same *laissez faire* doctrine, suppose that as the Union has stood a great while, it will stand a great while longer. No notice has been given, no trumpet sounded; and the

Union which has borne a great many shocks, will bear a great many more. These men do not know that a revolution is always half finished, before the majority of the community have found out that it is begun. They do not know that it is not the conscious action of the people, but their unconscious action, that determines the course of events. It was after the battle of Bunker Hill, that Congress met and deliberately voted that they "had not taken up arms with the vain and impious purpose of separating themselves from the mother country;" and then they went on and separated. That is the way we are doing. We pledge ourselves against Disunion, and still, after all, every earnest anti-slavery man, calling himself Republican, Union-saver, or what you please, keeps in the corner of his heart a little willingness, like Mr. Banks down in Maine, "in a certain contingency, to let the Union slide." He keeps a place for a disunion argument, just as our friends of *The Tribune* are willing that 'J. S. P.,' of Washington, should have his little column to preach a little of the leaven of disunion, although the editors have not approved it yet. In our more earnest moments, when a fugitive slave case is before us, or when Charles Sumner is struck down, or when a new tragedy takes place in Kansas, we are all disunionists. When sober reflection comes, many a man who thinks himself so, finds that he is not ready for that, quite yet. He finds that, after all, the danger is not so imminent as he supposed, and he says, like the man in the story—"Go along with your old ark; I guess it won't be much of a shower after all." (Laughter.) It is like the ferryman out West, of whom I heard the other day. He had taken a great many across in his old canoe, and he wanted mightily to cross once more when he had a profitable job to do. 'You had better not go,' said they. 'Yes,' said he, 'I am going.' 'You had better not go; you will be drowned.' 'Never was drowned in my life,' said the man as he went into the boat; and he lost the chance to say that again. It is so with every revolution in the world. Just as some leader of the people has the words upon his lips, 'There

is to be no revolution,' he turns round and finds himself in the midst of it.

We are in the midst of a revolution. The anti-slavery movement is not a reform; it is a revolution. It is a revolution when Garrison defies the United States Government in Boston, outside the Constitution; or when Gerrit Smith, in New York, defies it in his way. So long as the Jerrys are rescued, it is of no consequence whether they are rescued with law or without law; it is equally revolution.

'Treason, they say, ne'er prospers; what's the reason?

Why, when it prospers, none dare call it treason.'

Let the radical anti-slavery men come to the epoch of success, and the Henry Wilsons will cease to talk about hanging Disunionists, and will come back to their old opinion of the patriotism of the Garrisons.

In the meantime, there are two things especially to be done by Abolitionists, in the States where they live. It often happens, in the progress of institutions, Mr. Chairman, that the very thing which at one period is a bulwark for freedom, becomes at a later period, and upon further experience, a check and a hindrance to it. There are two institutions in our free States now, founded with the noblest purposes, sustained with the bravest energies, but both of them grown antagonistic to freedom, by the progress of things, —both destined, I trust, to be abolished.

The first of these institutions, once noble, now out-grown and objectionable, is the Underground Railroad, to Canada. God grant that we may see an end to that very soon! The Underground Railroad, as I have believed for years, and believe more and more every day, is demoralizing the conscience of our people, accustoming them to think that all their duty to freedom consists, not in making their own soil free, but in pointing the way to some other. I want, and you want, if there is any manhood or womanhood in you, to live upon free earth; but the soil which we tread is not free, if, when a man comes to your door and asks for your protection, in the dusk of the evening, all you can do for him

is to say, There is a dollar, and that railroad leads to Canada. That is not freedom. It is not freedom, so long as there is any difference between Canada and Broadway to a single human being who has a right to tread God's earth. (Applause.) To establish freedom anywhere, begin by establishing it where you stand. If you cannot make free the soil upon which your own feet tread, it may be a necessary evil to recognize something better somewhere else; but it is a disgrace to you, so long as the fact remains. It is ignoble; it is dishonorable; it is worse than that, because it is demoralizing. The Underground Railroad makes cowards of us all. It makes us think, and hesitate, and look over our shoulders, and listen, and fear, and not dare to tell the truth to the man who stands by our side. It may be a necessary evil, but an evil it is. I do not know how it is elsewhere, but I can say that in the city where I live, there has been from year to year, a deepening conviction, that it is degrading to send a man out of the city, merely because he came into it upon the Southern track. It is degrading, dishonorable, demoralizing.

There came some time ago, a black man of herculean proportions, who had earned his right to freedom by brave labors. That man had gone from city to city in the free States, seeking rest and finding none; because, though he was willing to stay and run the risk himself, the best advice he could get at any of these places was, to push a little further along. He came to Worcester at last. We looked at the man, and took the measure of him. Such sinews I never saw. That man could take a barrel of flour in his arms, lift it easily, and hold it out at arm's length. We looked at him, and we said to him, "Those arms are better arguments for staying, than your legs are for going, (laughter and applause,) so stay where you are." He stayed. In order that there might be no uncertainty as to the fact that he was there, some of us took pains to allude to it in the Boston papers, for the benefit of any United States official who might feel disposed to come and make a call upon him;

but there is something in the air of Worcester a little prejudicial to the health of that class of officers, and none of them ever came. I thank God that other slaves have done the same thing since. He was not the first, nor is the latest one, I trust, the last. I hope that the time will come in Massachusetts, if nowhere else, when we can call every fugitive slave within her borders to meet in Convention under his own proper name, and hold deliberation in the light of day; yes, and to advertise the Convention in the pro-slavery issues of the widest circulation, in the New York papers, in the well-named *Journal of Commerce* and the ill-named *Journal of Civilization*, to advertise in them all; and, Mr. Chairman, in the name of the citizens of Worcester, I demand that that Convention shall be held in our City Hall. (Applause.)

So far, so good. There is something else to be abolished besides the Underground Railroad, and that is Personal Liberty Bills, as we frame them now. I do not know a Personal Liberty Bill in any State in this Union, that is not as it stands, a refuge for cowards; because they all imply, every one of them, that if a man slips through the defences they offer him, he is a slave, and must be sent southward as such. Mr. Chairman, I do not want to see the fugitive slaves that come into Massachusetts protected only at the cost of perjury on the jury trial. I do not want to see any jury trial for fugitive slaves. Slavery and juries are two things irreconcilable. They have nothing in common. If a human being is to be declared a slave, I would rather have only one man's conscience darkened by the guilt of it, though it be dark as Loring's, than have twelve men in the community, put into the dilemma either of perjuring themselves upon their oath to try the case according to the law and the evidence, or of sending the man into slavery. I do not want to see Personal Liberty Bills based upon any narrower ground than the absolute right of every man to freedom, law or no law, slavery or no slavery, Constitution or no Constitution. (Applause.) There is growing up, I rejoice to say, in Massachusetts, in New York, in Wisconsin, a

protest against these laws. The only true law is the law which makes the difference between the criminal and the slave, not in favor of the criminal, but in favor of the slave. What we want is, a law, which makes escape from slavery not the proof of crime, but the crowning fact of virtue. We want a law in the spirit of the old Quaker who was sheltering a colored man under the Fugitive Slave Law, but not knowing who he was. His neighbors were frightened at last, and came and remonstrated with him. 'Why,' said they, 'that man has broken the law.' 'O,' said the Quaker, 'I think not; he seems a good man.' 'But,' said they, 'if you did but know it, he is actually a thief.' 'O no,' said the Quaker, 'I cannot believe that, he seems such a good man.' 'Why, yes he is,' said they, 'he is a fugitive slave; he has stolen himself from his master.' 'Well,' said the Quaker, 'he is a better man than I thought he was.' I want a law based on that principle. The key-note is struck, I rejoice to say, in the State in which we stand now. I must go back, Mr. Phillips must go back, and tell Massachusetts to look to her laurels. We have not even had proposed in the Massachusetts Legislature any point, so high and so honorable as the resolution proposed in New York:—

'Resolved, That this State will not allow slavery within her borders, in any form, under any pretence, for any time, however short.' (Great applause.)

There is a Personal Liberty Bill, indeed! Give a man such a State as that to live in, and the soil he treads upon, though part of a Republic, is as free as if it were ruled by a Queen. It is as free as Canada itself. God speed the time when the Littlejohns of New York shall be the great men of the State. Speaker Littlejohn, like his namesake in old English times, may be an outlaw temporarily. No matter; his arrow has cleft the wand, and with Gerrit Smith for his Robin Hood, and—shall I say it—Henry Ward Beecher for his Friar Tuck, his ultimate victory is sure. (Laughter and applause.)