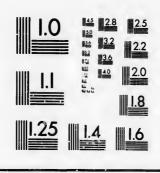


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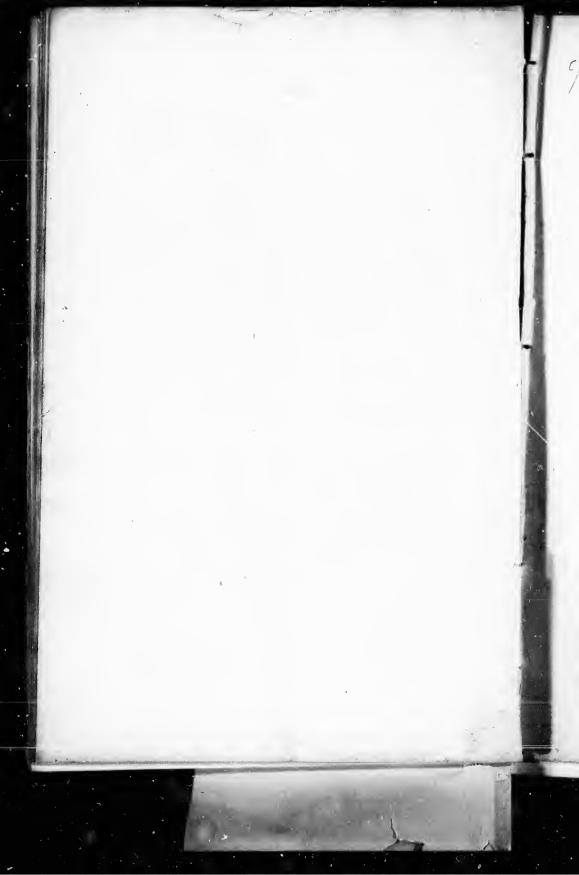
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Vol. 102

A LETTER

TO THE

HONOURABLE CHARLES SUMNER,

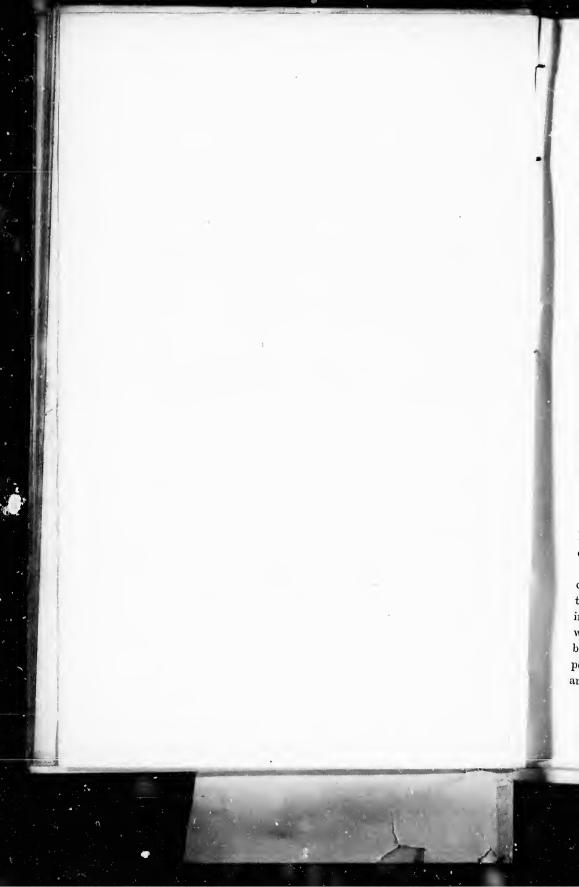
UPON HIS SPEECH DELIVERED ON THE

ALABAMA CLAIMS CONVENTION,

FROM

BRITANNICUS.

LIVERPOOL, May, 1869.



To the Honourable CHARLES SUMNER.

SIR,

Your speech on the "Alabama Claims Convention" has caused much anxiety to good men in this country. They fear that it implies a settled policy to keep open a controversy with England, and perhaps at some future day to pave the way for a rupture. Permit me, as one who knows America and values its friendship, to address a few words to you on the line of argument you have taken on this disputed question. I am emboldened to do so because the closing portion of your speech testifies to a desire for peace and amity with England, and because I cannot think that a man of your vast political experience and earnestness of purpose can wilfully widen the breach that already exists between the two nations.

I will not attempt to go into a nice disquisition on international law; enough has already been written on that score, and the public mind in both countries has been confused rather than enlightened by the wearisome subtleties of lawyers. What I wish to do is to convey to you briefly what is the practical view of the subject taken here by upright men who are anxious to act justly, and would willingly make any reasonable concession to America sooner than have a rankling sore disturbing the harmony between the two countries.

I will begin by premising that the vast majority of the people of Great Britain have an earnest desire to maintain friendship with the United States; they have not the remotest wish to injure or insult your country in any way; they have none of that animosity which, alas! so often finds an expression in the American press, but they have a sort of bewildered feeling at the reluctance of your people to meet them half way in their amicable sentiments; they are baffled in their attempt to comprehend why it is that Americans

show such soreness against their old mother country, for they feel that they have not acted so as to deserve this feeling.

With respect to what are called the "Alabama depredations" there is little difference of opinion in this country among intelligent men; they are viewed with regret and reprobation, and I beg to assuro you that it never was the general sentiment of this country to view these acts with complacency. All through your civil war there was a large party who condemned the fitting out of Corfederate eruisers in this country, and had international law been sufficiently clear on the subject most certainly these acts would not have occurred; but, rightly or wrongly, our Government conceived that they were precluded by the provisions of international law from active interference; the ease was far more complicated than people on your side are willing to admit, and our Government with every desire to do right, found it literally impossible to avoid giving offence to your people. With the light now shed upon the subject, it is certain that our Government would be more prompt in dealing with any future ease; but when your civil war broke out there was the greatest obscurity in the public mind about the legal aspect of such questions, and it was only by painful experience that we found out both what was due to other nations, and what powers our own Government might rightfully exercise over British subjects.

It is now very generally admitted, however, that the Americans have a real grievance against us as respects the Alabama and other Confederate cruisers, and the majority of our people would readily consent to pay any fair compensation for actual damage done to your trade, if such damage could be assessed by fair arbitrament. We do not grudge the money; wo wish to remove a grievance and restore amity, and many even of those among us who fail to see that our Government committed any breach of international law are quite ready to pay a bill of damages if such shall be awarded against us.

But we feel that the question is too complicated to be decided exparte, we wish it submitted to a competent tribunal, where all collateral considerations may be fairly and equitably weighed. Such a tribunal was provided by the convention entered into with Reverdy Johnson, and it has caused as much surprise as grief in this country

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Our Government made, as we thought, and still think, large concessions, and we left every fairly debateable point to arbitration. We took our chance of being muleted in a heavy sum, and we did not expect a kindred and Christian people would so flatly reject the only rational way in which nations averse to war can honourably settle their disputes.

But it seems from your speech that it is no longer the "Alabama question," but our recognition of the belligerent rights of the South that constitutes the gravamen of your complaint against England. You charge us with having immensely prolonged the war and doubled the cost of subduing the South, and on that ground you set down to our debit the larger half of your national debt, and you speak as though no settlement should be made with us unless we assume some \$2,000,000,000 of your debt, with a contrite apology besides for our wicked assistance to the rebels!

Such charges and such claims fill us with amazement! Up till quite lately it was not even understood in this country that our proclamation of neutrality was believed to be a wrong by the American people. No doubt Mr. Seward often complained of it in his despatches, but this was thought to be the result of some mental obliquity peculiar to himself, and not to reflect the unbiassed opinion of the great American nation. We did not think it possible that your people could be serious in objecting to our doing what seemed to us to be as unavoidable as it was just to all eoncerned. I state this fact in order to bring out in bold relief the extraordinary difference of opinion that prevails on the two sides of the Atlantic, and to inculeate the importance of looking at these subjects from both points of view. I repeat that during the progress of your civil war, and for some years afterwards, it did not even occur to the British public that our Government could have done otherwise than recognise that a state of war existed in your country, and that British subjects must be put under the usual neutral obligations. No doubt some of us did think that the Queen's proclamation might have been issued with greater propriety after the arrival of your ambassador. Some of us did think that there was undue precipitance about the measure, but even the warmest friends of the North felt that the step had to be taken sooner or later, and never dreamt that your country would make it a grievance against us that we recognized a state of war at all.

Snrely you forget the circumstances in which England was placed when your civil war broke out. She had an immeuse maritime commerce with both sections of your country, more especially with the southern half, and it was necessary that our Government should warn shipowners of the risk they ran in trading with blockaded ports. Had it not warned them that a state of war existed and imposed neutral obligations upon them, it would have been involved at once in endless complicated claims against your Government.

Further, it fills with astonishment all thinking men here—and I may add throughout Europe—that you should impute to us as a crime that which your Government had already done itself. President Lincoln's proclamation of blockade, as all the world knows, was issued before our declaration of neutrality. From the very first his Government treated the insurrection as civil war; from the very first it conceded belligerent rights to the South; and surely we are not criminals for following the example of your own Government. Surely we were not to regard the Confederates as banditti and pirates, when your own Government never dreamt of doing so; and yet this is what you appear to think we should have done.

You seem to forget that when this unhappy war broke out it was the general opinion of Europe that the United States would be divided into two confederations, and this was apart from all predilections for either side. It was simply founded on the fact that one half your territory, containing one third of the population, seeded from the Union, and European nations doubted either your power or willingness to subjugate that portion by force of arms. They searcely thought it was consistent with your form of government to attempt it, for they looked upon your federation as a voluntary union of States, and they understood the corner stone of your

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system to be that "all just Governments derive their powers from the free consent of the governed."

When, therefore, they saw your vast commonwealth splitting up into two halves of nearly equal size, they felt they could not deny to the South the belligerent rights it actually exercised. Anticipating in all probability the creation of two separate nations, they desired to preserve strict neutrality between them, so as to leave neither of them just ground for recrimination afterwards.

No doubt these views appear obsolete now; success has lent its prestige to the claims of the North; but surely, when you criticise the conduct of our Government in 1861, you must place yourself in our attitude at that time, and survey the horizon as it then spread out before us; and mayhap it may not be amiss as well to refresh yourself with a retrospect of Northern opinion at that date, and, if I mistake not, you will find that no small section of your own countrymen then held that they had neither the right nor the ability to coerce the South back into the Union.

But England is the only foreign nation that sinned against you in this concession of belligerency! Your speech takes no account of France, who did exactly the same—there is no word of dividing the half cost of the war between France and England! And yet you cannot deny that, in all respects, France is as culpable as ourselves, if your view of international obligations is correct—nay, almost all the nations of Christendom arc, for they nearly all followed our example, and it certainly would be some consolation for us if you put us all in the pillory together. We could then keep each other just a little in countenance!

England, however, must bear the shame alone, because she was the pioneer of emancipation, and yet refused to help you in your struggle to put down Southern slavery! This accusation bulks largely in your speech, and points some of your bitterest sarcasms against our country. Can you really have forgotten how steadily your Government refused for years after the war commenced to speak a word in favour of emancipation? Have you forgotten how Mr. Lincoln proclaimed so late as 1863, if I recollect aright, that if the South returned to the Union their slave property would

be guaranteed? Nothing could be plainer—seen from our side the Atlantic—than that your Government engaged in the war simply to restore the Union, and not to abolish slavery, and it was equally plain that it became a convert to emancipation only when it found that no other resource remained by which to subjugate the South. Why should you demand of England in 1861 a perspicacity your own President did not show in 1862? Why should you accuse her of sympathising with slavery because she did not make common cause with the North who was all the while protesting vehemently that it did not mean to abolish slavery, but only to restore the Union!

No doubt, far-sighted men like yourself perceived from the first that the success of the North involved the downfall of slavery—no doubt you looked upon the war from the first as an anti-slavery one, and a respectable minority of your countrymen did the same; but you cannot blame our people for judging of the question by the public acts and avowals of your Government, and these were indisputably pro-slavery for a long period after the war broke out.

Further, you give our Government no credit for the firmness it displayed in refusing all solicitations to recognise the independence of the South. You omit to take notice that France strongly urged us to do so, and that we steadily declined, even at a time when public opinion was almost unanimous in expecting the eventual success of the South; you forget that, if we had followed the precedents your people had set us, we should undoubtedly have recognized the independence of the South. We should have done as you did in the case of the Hungarian Republic, and as you would undoubtedly have done in the case of a successful insurrection in Ireland. Pray, imagine for a moment what the action of the United States would have been towards Ireland, say in 1848.50, had she risen in rebellion almost as one man, placed 300,000 troops on the field, inflicted on us a succession of crushing defeats, and held for two or three years the great bulk of her territory inviolate as the Confederate Government did. Would your country have declined to recognise her as a belligerent? Would you, in 1850, have allowed no privateer to be fitted out for her support? I ask r side the r simply s equally a it found e South, aity your ceuse her common hemently store the

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you, is it not almost certain that your Government would have acknowledged her independence long before four years had passed? I repeat the question with regard to Canada. Had that province expelled the British forces in 1837, and held its gound against all invasion for years together, would your Government have declined either to acknowledge its belligerency or independence? Is it notertain that it would have done both, and have given to the "rebels" quite as much assistance, material and moral, as ever England gave to the South? Remember I am not putting those cases as tests of what the United States would do now, when retaliation might be alleged as an excuse; but as instances of what your Government and people would have done twenty or thirty years ago, as no one can doubt who knows the history of the American people, and their readiness at all times to sympathise with rebellions.

Is it necessary, in proof of this, to refer to the resolution of your House of Representatives a few weeks since in favour of acknowledging the independence of Cuba, though the rebellion there has only been in progress for a few months, and with far less chance of success than the Southerners had in the first year of their war? Is it not almost indecent to censure Eagland so greatly for doing a far milder act than your lower House of Congress have just sought to accomplish. How happy it would be in international disputes, if the aspiration of the poet were realized—

"O wad some Power the giftie gie us To see ourselves as others see us."

Your charges against England would melt away if the mirror were faithfully held up to the face of your own country.

You would then remember what you seem wholly to have forgotten, that for several years the United States has harboured an organization hostile to the British erown, whose avowed objects are to wrest Canada and Ireland from our grasp; you would recall the fact, that vast bodies of Fenians have been drilling in the most open manner in all your great towns for years past; that they have received countenance from many of your municipal bodies, and have even been recognized on the floor of Congress. No act that I know of was ever done in our country during the heat of your struggle more fitted to irritate a friendly nation than some of the

doings of your Fenian fellow citizens. Was there ever a more scandalous breach of international law than the Fenian invasion of Canada? Was ever such an outrage perpetrated on European ground without reprisals? And yet what apology has your Government ever offered to your peaceful neighbours across the St. Lawrence? Depend upon it when the balance is struck in the great chancery of nations to which you refer the conduct of England, the encouragement your country has given to Fenianism will bulk as largely as the aid that Southern sympathisers in this country may have rendered to the South.

But the people of this country are not disposed to quarrel about these Fenian outrages; they regard them as a rough sort of set-off against the indefensible doings of the Alabama and her consorts; they are willing to let their side of the controversy slumber if you will do the same with your's.

There are other "set-offs" which a man of catholic sympathies should not be blind to. Your civil war inflicted crucl sufferings on England as well as America. Its very first effect was to cut off the staff of life from the millions of Lancashire; the great centres of our cotton industry became silent with enforced idleness; some half million of the most industrious operatives in Britain had to be fed with the dole of public charity; and yet never did they raise their voices in complaint that your hard policy had reduced them There were counsellors who told us that your to pauperism. blockade of the Southern ports was but a "paper" onc, and that we were entitled to disregard it by the law of nations. contrasted our powerful navy with the little handful of war vessels you had when hostilities broke out, and they asked why our people should starve when we could so easily force our way into the Southern harbours and bring over the coveted material which was rotting in the South. We withstood these temptations and they were great, but we get no credit for it from you. Perhaps you will say that we did so because we were afraid of the North; but such was not the case. The enormous power of your section of the country was then undeveloped, and was not suspected in Europe, scarcely even in America. Your war navy was then a more rasion of a ground Governthe St. in the aduct of enianism in this

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feeble and wholly unable to cope with ours. Nothing seemed easier from our side the Atlantic than to brush aside your blockade and secure for our sole benefit the cotton trade of the South, and along with it a monopoly of their commerce, which gratitude to England and hatred of the North would have combined to bestow on us. We resisted these enormous temptations, and we did so because the national conscience was strong enough to overpower the clamor of self-interest; but for all this you give us not a word of credit—no not one!

To this very day our cotton industry languishes, and is well night rained, as a direct consequence of your great convulsion; the spindles and looms of Lancashire are starved for want of the raw material; your cotton crops have diminished to a half of what they were before the war, and all our efforts have failed to supply this enormous void. As a necessary consequence Lancashire is impoverished, its former wealth has in a great measure departed, bankruptcy is staring in the face one-half of our manufacturers, and the underpaid operatives are leaving our shores in despair of ever seeing their trade flourishing again. No portion of the Northern States has suffered half as much as Lancashire has done from the effects of your civil war, and this blow to the great heart of our commerce has vibrated through the empire, and caused private suffering unequalled since the early years of this century.

Of all this you are either profoundly ignorant or profoundly oblivious; but it does strike Englishmen, who know by bitter experience the misery of the last few years, as a hard and releutless policy that Americans should make no allowance for the punishment your civil war inflicted upon us, and especially upon that part of our community whose sympathics were notoriously with the North, and who in their hour of greatest need never raised a voice to purchase bread at the cost of honour.

Yes, it has often struck me that the public sentiment of America is singularly harsh towards England—her faults are paraded, her virtues are ignored—your public are ever and anon lashed into fury by a skilful and disingenuous impeachment of this country, but none of your public men are bold enough or manful enough to say a kind word in her defence. You dwell with clever irony upon

the cheers which Mr. Laird evoked in Parliament, but you say nothing about the silent anguish of Lancashire; you inflame the Americans with the plaudits which some passenger ship bestowed upon the "Alabama," you do not soothe them with the gush of sympathy we sent over the ocean upon the murder of your noble President! It is poor statesmanship to bandy accusations, clse I might parallel the cheers given to Laird with the cheers your Congress gave to Wilkes, and the honours paid to Captain Semmes with the honours paid to the Fenian Head Centre on the floor of Congress. But I have no love to dwell on these things. I reluctantly recall them, because I am forced to make a debtor as well as creditor side to your account.

That the neutrality of England was not unfair to the North, I will further prove from Southern evidence. Fas est ab hoste doceri. I ask you what temper prevailed in the South towards England during your civil strife; was it not one of angry discontent? Did not Southern papers constantly abuse England for not giving them what they thought to be their rightful ducs? Was it not the prevailing sentiment of the Confederacy that British neutrality was onesided, and that its bias was not Southern but Northern? Ask Mason and Slidell what they thought of the attitude of England, and they will tell you that her obstinate refusal to recognise Southern independence caused the downfall of their cause. They will tell you that all Europe only waited for the signal from England to proclaim that the South should be admitted into the family of nations, but England unreasonably and unfairly withheld that signal. To this very day the scutiment of the South is sore against this country, the bitterness is as great, or greater, than is felt in the North; only the complaint is that we refused to do that which you accuse us of doing. The two sections of your country attack us from opposite poles, and no better proof could be given, that the conduct of England was too impartial to satisfy either.

I have surely said enough to defend in a great measure the public action of England against your impeachment. I say, in a great measure, because I allow, in common with most Englishmen,

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that we were not faultless, and for those faults that can fairly be proved we are willing to atone; but I must refer, in conclusion, to what evidently constitutes the groundwork of your irritation against us. It is the want of sympathy this country showed for the North in its time of trouble. You cannot put this into a bill of damages, but it inclines you to push to the extremest verge every legal claim you can establish against us.

I admit, in common with most of my countrymen, that the press and public men of England bore hardly on the North during the struggle; we feel now that we took wrong views on some points, and did the patriotism of your people seant justiec. We frankly apologise for this error. But we do not feel that our conduct was base or mean-neither was it irrational; the "rebels" of the South were our flesh and blood as well as the "loyal" men of the North; they made an amazing'y heroie stand for what they honestly deemed to be their rights, and it need not be wondered at if many in our country sympathised with the weaker party, struggling gallantly against tremendous odds. Besides, the feeling largely prevailed on this side the Atlantic, that your confederation was a voluntary union of States, and that the principles of your Government and the facts of your history alike forbad a war for the subjugation of recalcitrant members. We thought that as your countrymen had invariably, from the days of Washington, sympathised with discontented nationalities, and proclaimed their right to rebel, you would not feel it right to eoeree a great section of your own people.

Then the question of slavery was in a large measure withdrawn from the controversy, for had not your Government proclaimed that the war was for union, not emancipation, and many people in England thought that a union so restored would rivet slavery more firmly than ever. To these motives must be added another, which, if not exalted, is at least human. There was a fear, lest your Republic, if allowed to grow undivided, would become overwhelmingly powerful in the scale of nations, and many who had no dislike of Americans as a people, thought it better for the welfare of the world that a peaceable division of North America should take place. History had taught us this lesson, that no nation can

safely be trusted with irresponsible powers. Europe had paid a terrible tribute in blood for the predominance of France, under Napoleon, and was it wonderful that the stupendous growth of your country should excite apprehension? Neither was your policy towards England before the war fitted to disarm this feeling. It was often subject of complaint that you treated us with less than justice; it was feared that you wished to humiliate us, and it was not unreasonably thought that a division of your country would protect us from an aggressive policy afterwards, and preserve for future ages that "balance of power," which Europe has esteemed the best security for international peace.

These considerations I venture to offer as a palliation—if not an exeuse—for the unfavourable tone of a large part of the British public towards the North. But many of our leading men and many of our best papers were your staunch friends all through the war; little notice is taken of this in the North. The sympathies of such men as the Duke of Argyle, Messrs. Cobden and Bright, Messrs. Forster and Mill were well known to be on your side, and a large proportion of our people, especially among the working classes, went along with them. The party represented by these men now enjoys the supremacy in political power, and surely this fact smooths away the obstacles to a mutual raprochement.

In conclusion I would say, "Let bye-gones be bye-gones;" let us bury our controversies in a friendly arbitration, and when the question is once settled, let the waters of Lethe flow over it; and when in future ages all passionate interest in the matter has ceased, the historian will exhume the controversy, and tell how two great and Christian nations once settled their disputes in harmony with the benign precepts of the religion they professed.

BRITANNICUS.

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