

### CHAPTER XIII.

MR. ADAMS PRESENTS PETITIONS FOR THE ABOLISHMENT OF SLAVERY—OPPOSITION OF SOUTHERN MEMBERS—EXCITING SCENES IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES—MARKS OF CONFIDENCE IN MR. ADAMS.

In the meantime, during the years 1836 and 1837, the public mind in the Northern States, became fully aroused to the enormities of American slavery—its encroachments on the rights and interests of the free States—the undue influence it was exercising in our national councils—and the evident determination to enlarge its borders and its evils, by the addition of new and large territories. Petitions for the abolition of slavery and the slave trade in the District of Columbia and the Territories, began to pour into Congress, from every section of the East and North. These were generally presented by Mr. Adams. His age and experience—his well-known influence in the House of Representatives—his patriotism, and his intrepid advocacy of human freedom—inspired the confidence of the people of the free States, and led them to entrust to him their petitions. With scrupulous fidelity he performed the duty thus imposed upon him. Whoever petitions might come from—whatever the nature of

their prayer—whether for such objects as he could sanction or not—if they were clothed in respectful language, Mr. Adams felt himself under an imperative obligation to present them to Congress. For several sessions at this period, few days passed without his presenting more or less petitions having some relation to the subject of slavery.

The southern members of Congress became alarmed at these demonstrations, and determined to arrest them, even at the sacrifice, if need be, of the right of petition—the most sacred privilege of freemen. On the 8th of Feb., 1836, a committee was raised by the House of Representatives, to take into consideration what disposition should be made of petitions and memorials for the abolition of slavery and the slave trade, in the District of Columbia, and report thereon. This committee consisted of Messrs. Pinckney of South Carolina, Hamer of Ohio, Pierce of New Hampshire, Hardin of Kentucky, Jarvis of Maine, Owens of Georgia, Muhlenberg of Pennsylvania, Dromgoole of Virginia, and Turrill of New York. On the 18th of May, the committee made a lengthy and unanimous report through Mr. Pinckney, recommending the adoption of the following resolutions:—

“Resolved, That Congress possesses no constitutional authority to interfere in any way with the institution of slavery in any of the States of this Confederacy.

“Resolved, That Congress ought not to interfere in any way with slavery in the District of Columbia.

“And whereas, It is extremely important and desirable that the



agitation of this subject should be finally arrested, for the purpose of restoring tranquillity to the public mind, your committee respectfully recommend the adoption of the following additional resolution, viz. :—

“Resolved, That all petitions, memorials, resolutions, propositions or papers, relating in any way, or to any extent whatever, to the subject of slavery, or the abolition of slavery, shall, without being either printed or referred, be laid upon the table, and that no further action whatever shall be had thereon.”

When the first of these resolutions was taken up, Mr. Adams said, if the House would allow him five minutes' time, he would prove the resolution to be untrue. His request was denied.

On the third resolution Mr. Adams refused to vote, and sent to the Speaker's chair the following declaration, demanding that it should be placed on the journal of the House, there to stand to the latest posterity :—

“I hold the resolution to be a direct violation of the Constitution of the United States, of the rules of this House, and of the rights of my constituents.”

Notwithstanding the rule embodied in this resolution virtually trampled the right of petition into the dust, yet it was adopted by the House, by a large majority. But Mr. Adams was not to be deterred by this arbitrary restriction, from a faithful discharge of his duty as a representative of the people. Petitions on the subject of slavery continued to be transmitted to him in increased numbers. With unwavering firmness—against a bitter and unscrupulous opposition, exasperated to the highest pitch by his pertinacity—amidst a perfect tempest of vituperation and abuse—he persevered in

presenting these petitions, one by one, to the amount sometimes of two hundred in a day—demanding the action of the House on each separate petition.

His position amid these scenes was in the highest degree illustrious and sublime. An old man, with the weight of years upon him, forgetful of the elevated stations he had occupied, and the distinguished honors received for past services, turning away from the repose which age so greatly needs, and laboring, amidst scorn and derision, and threats of expulsion and assassination, to maintain the sacred right of petition for the poorest and humblest in the land—insisting that the voice of a free people should be heard by their representatives, when they would speak in condemnation of human slavery and call upon them to maintain the principles of liberty embodied in the immortal Declaration of Independence—was a spectacle unwitnessed before in the history of legislation. A few specimens of these transactions will enable the reader to judge of the trials Mr. Adams was compelled to endure in the discharge of his duties, and also of his moral courage and indomitable perseverance, amid the most appalling circumstances.

On the 6th of Jan., 1837, Mr. Adams presented the petition of one hundred and fifty women, whom he stated to be the wives and daughters of his immediate constituents, praying for the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia, and moved that the petition be read.

Mr. Glascock objected to its reception.

Mr. Parks moved that the preliminary motion, on the reception of the petition, be laid on the table, which was carried.



Mr. Adams said, that if he had understood the decision of the Speaker in this case, it was not the petition itself which was laid upon the table, but the motion to receive. In order to save the time of the House, he wished to give notice that he should call up that motion, for decision, every day, so long as he should be permitted to do so by the House; because he should not consider his duty accomplished so long as the petition was not received, and so long as the House had not decided that it would not receive it.

Mr. Pinckney rose to a question of order, and inquired if there was now any question pending before the House?

The Speaker said, he had understood the gentleman from Massachusetts as merely giving notice of a motion hereafter to be made. In doing so, it certainly was not in order to enter into debate.

Mr. Adams said, that so long as freedom of speech was allowed to him as a member of that House, he would call up that question until it should be decided.

Mr. Adams was called to order.

Mr. A. said, he would then have the honor of presenting to the House the petition of two hundred and twenty-eight women, the wives and daughters of his immediate constituents; and as a part of the speech which he intended to make, he would take the liberty of reading the petition. It was not long, and would not consume much time.

Mr. Glascock objected to the reception of the petition.

Mr. Adams proceeded to read, that the petitioners, inhabitants of South Weymouth, in the State of Massachusetts, "impressed with the sinfulness of slavery, and keenly aggrieved by its existence in a part of our country over which Congress —"

Mr. Pinckney rose to a question of order. Had the gentleman from Massachusetts a right, under the rule, to read the petition?

The Speaker said, the gentleman from Massachusetts had a right to make a statement of the contents of the petition.

Mr. Pinckney desired the decision of the Speaker as to whether a gentleman had a right to read a petition.

Mr. Adams said he was reading the petition as a part of his speech, and he took this to be one of the privileges of a member of the House. It was a privilege he would exercise till he should be deprived of it by some positive act.

The Speaker repeated that the gentleman from Massachusetts had a right to make a brief statement of the contents of the petition. It was not for the Speaker to decide whether that brief statement should be made in the gentleman's own language, or whether he should look over the petition, and take his statement from that.

Mr. Adams.—At the time my friend from South Carolina —

The Speaker said the gentleman must proceed to state the contents of the petition.

Mr. Adams.—I am doing so, sir.

The Speaker.—Not in the opinion of the chair.

Mr. Adams.—I was at this point of the petition—"Keenly aggrieved by its existence in a part of our country over which Congress possesses exclusive jurisdiction in all cases whatsoever —"

Loud cries of "Order," "Order!"

Mr. Adams.—"Do most earnestly petition your honorable body —"

Mr. Chambers of Kentucky rose to a point of order.

Mr. Adams.—"Immediately to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia —"

Mr. Chambers reiterated his call to order, and the Speaker directed Mr. Adams to take his seat.

Mr. Adams proceeded with great rapidity of enunciation, and in a very loud tone of voice—"And to declare every human being free who sets foot upon its soil!"

The confusion in the hall at this time was very great. The Speaker decided that it was not in order for a member to read a petition, whether it was long or short.

Mr. Adams appealed from any decision which went to establish the principle that a member of the House should not have the power to read what he chose. He had never before heard of such a thing. If this practice was to be reversed, let the decision stand upon record, and let it appear how entirely the freedom of speech was suppressed in this House. If the reading of a paper was to be suppressed in his person, so help him God, he would only consent to it as a matter of record.

Mr. Adams finished the petition. The petitioners "respectfully announce their intention to present the same petition yearly before this honorable body, that it might at least be a memorial in the holy cause of human freedom that they had done what they could."



These words were read amidst tumultuous cries for "order," from every part of the House. The petition was finally received, and laid upon the table.

Other scenes of a still more exciting character soon occurred.

On the 7th of February, 1837, after Mr. Adams had offered some two hundred or more abolition petitions, he came to a halt; and, without yielding the floor, employed himself in packing up his budget. He was about resuming his seat, when he took up a paper, and hastily glancing at it, exclaimed, in a shrill tone—

● Mr. Speaker, I have in my possession a petition of a somewhat extraordinary character; and I wish to inquire of the chair if it be in order to present it."

"If the gentleman from Massachusetts," said the Speaker, "will inform the chair what the character of the petition is, it will probably be able to decide on the subject."

"Sir," ejaculated Mr. Adams, "the petition is signed by eleven slaves of the town of Fredericksburgh, in the county of Culpepper, in the state of Virginia. It is one of those petitions which, it has occurred to my mind, are not what they purport to be. It is signed partly by persons who cannot write, by making their marks, and partly by persons whose handwriting would manifest that they have received the education of slaves. The petition declares itself to be from slaves, and I am requested to present it. I will send it to the chair."

The Speaker (Mr. Polk,) who habitually extended to Mr. Adams every courtesy and kindness imaginable, was taken by surprise, and found himself involved in a dilemma. Giving his chair one of those *hitches* which ever denoted his excitement, he said that a petition from slaves was a novelty, and involved a question that he did not feel called upon to decide. He would like to take time to consider it; and, in the meantime, would refer it to the House.

The House was very thin at the time, and little attention was paid to what was going on, till the excitement of the Speaker attracted the attention of Mr. Dixon H. Lewis, of Alabama, who impatiently, and under great excitement, rose and inquired what the petition was.

Mr. Speaker afforded the required information. Mr. Lewis, forgetting all discretion, whilst he frothed at the mouth, turned towards

Mr. Adams, and ejaculated at the top of his voice, "By G-d, sir, this is not to be endured any longer!"

"Treason! treason!" screamed a half dozen other members. "Expel the old scoundrel; put him out; do not let him disgrace the House any longer!"

"Get up a resolution to meet the case," exclaimed a member from North Carolina.

Mr. George C. Dromgoole, who had acquired a very favorable reputation as a parliamentarian, was selected as the very man who, of all others, was most capable of drawing up a resolution that would meet and cover the emergency. He produced a resolution with a preamble, in which it was stated, substantially, that, whereas the Hon. John Quincy Adams, a representative from Massachusetts, had presented to the House of Representatives a petition signed by negro slaves, thus "giving color to an idea" that bondmen were capable of exercising the right of petition, it was "Resolved, That he be taken to the bar of the House, and be censured by the Speaker thereof."

Mr. Haynes said, the true motion, in his judgment, would be to move that the petition be rejected.

Mr. Lewis hoped that no motion of that kind would come from any gentleman from a slaveholding section of the country.

Mr. Haynes said he would cheerfully withdraw his motion.

Mr. Lewis was glad the motion was withdrawn. He believed that the House should punish severely such an infraction of its decorum and its rules; and he called on the members from the slaveholding States to come forward now and demand of the House the punishment of the gentleman from Massachusetts.

Mr. Grantland, of Georgia, would second the motion, and go all lengths in support of it.

Mr. Lewis said, that if the House would inflict no punishment for such flagrant violations of its dignity as this, it would be better for the Representatives from the slaveholding States to go home at once.

Mr. Alford said, if the gentleman from Massachusetts intended to present this petition, the moment it was presented he should move, as an act of justice to the South, which he in part represented, and which he conceived had been treated with indignity, that it be taken from the House and burnt; and he hoped that every



man who was a friend to the constitution, would support him. There must be an end to this constant attempt to raise excitement, or the Union could not exist much longer. The moment any man should disgrace the Government under which he lived, by presenting a petition from *slaves*, praying for emancipation, he hoped that petition would, by order of the House, be committed to the flames.

Mr. Waddy Thompson moved the following resolution:—

“Resolved, That the Hon. John Quincy Adams, by the attempt just made by him to introduce a petition purporting on its face to be from slaves, has been guilty of a gross disrespect to this House, and that he be instantly brought to the bar, to receive the severe censure of the Speaker.”

The idea of bringing the venerable ex-President to the bar, like a culprit, to receive a reprimand from a comparatively youthful Speaker, would be a spectacle so disgraceful, and withal so absurd, that the proposition met with no favor. An easier way to reprimand was devised. Mr. Haynes introduced the following resolution:—

“Resolved, That John Quincy Adams, a Representative from the State of Massachusetts, has rendered himself justly liable to the severest censure of this House, and is censured accordingly, for having attempted to present to the House the petition of slaves.”

Several other resolutions and propositions, from members of slaveholding States, were submitted to the House; but none proved satisfactory even to themselves. Mr. Adams, unmoved by the tempest which raged around him, defended himself, and the integrity of his purpose, with the distinguished ability and eloquence which characterized all his public labors.

“In regard to the resolutions now before the House,” said he, “as they all concur in naming me, and in charging me with high crimes and misdemeanors, and in calling me to the bar of the House to answer for my crimes, I have thought it was my duty to remain silent, until it should be the pleasure of the House to act either on one or the other of these resolutions. I suppose that if I shall be brought to the bar of the House, I shall not be struck mute by the previous question, before I have an opportunity to say a word or two in my own defence. \* \* \* \* \*

“Now, as to the fact what the petition was for, I simply state to the gentleman from Alabama, (Mr. D. H. Lewis,) who has sent to

the table a resolution assuming that this petition was for the abolition of slavery—I state to him that he is mistaken. He must amend his resolution; for if the House should choose to read this petition, I can state to them they would find it something very much the reverse of that which the resolution states it to be. And if the gentleman from Alabama still chooses to bring me to the bar of the House, he must amend his resolution in a very important particular; for he may probably have to put into it, that my crime has been for attempting to introduce the petition of slaves that slavery should *not* be abolished. \* \* \* \* \*

“Sir, it is well known, that from the time I entered this House, down to the present day, I have felt it a sacred duty to present any petition, couched in respectful language, from any citizen of the United States, be its object what it may; be the prayer of it that in which I could concur, or that to which I was utterly opposed. It is for the sacred right of petition that I have adopted this course. \* \* \* \* \* Where is your law which says that the mean, and the low, and the degraded, shall be deprived of the right of petition, if their moral character is not good? Where, in the land of freemen, was the right of petition ever placed on the exclusive basis of morality and virtue? Petition is *supplication*—it is *entreaty*—it is *prayer*! And where is the degree of vice or immorality which shall deprive the citizen of the right to *supplicate* for a boon, or to *pray for mercy*? Where is such a law to be found? It does not belong to the most abject despotism! There is no absolute monarch on earth, who is not compelled, by the constitution of his country, to receive the petitions of his people, whosoever they may be. The Sultan of Constantinople cannot walk the streets and refuse to receive petitions from the meanest and vilest of the land. This is the law even of despotism. And what does your law say? Does it say that, before presenting a petition, you shall look into it, and see whether it comes from the virtuous, and the great, and the mighty? No sir; it says no such thing. The right of petition belongs to *all*. And so far from refusing to present a petition because it might come from those low in the estimation of the world, it would be an additional incentive, if such incentive were wanting.

“But I must admit,” continued Mr. Adams, sarcastically, “that when *color* comes into the question, there may be other considerations. It is possible that this House, which seems to consider it



so great a crime to attempt to offer a petition from slaves, may, for aught I know, say that freemen, if not of the *carnation*, shall be deprived of the right of petition, in the sense of the House."

When southern members saw that, in their haste, they had not tarried to ascertain the nature of the petition, and that it prayed for the *perpetuation*, instead of the *abolition* of slavery, their position became so ludicrous, that their exasperation was greatly increased. At the time the petition was announced by Mr. Adams, the House was very thin; but the excitement it produced soon filled it; and, besides, the *sergeant-at-arms* had been instructed to arrest and bring in all absentees. The excitement commenced at about one o'clock, and continued until seven o'clock in the evening, when the House adjourned. Mr. Adams stood at his desk, resolutely refusing to be seated till the matter was disposed of, alleging that if he were guilty, he was not entitled to a seat among high and honorable men. When Mr. Droomgoole's resolution was read to the House for its consideration, Mr. Adams yielded to it one of those sarcastic sneers which he was in the habit of giving, when provoked to satire; and said—"Mr. Speaker, if I understand the resolution of the honorable gentleman from Virginia, it charges me with being guilty of 'giving color to an idea!'" The whole House broke forth in one common irrepressible peal of laughter. The Droomgoole resolution was actually laughed out of existence. The House now found that it had got itself in a dilemma,—that Mr. Adams was too much for it; and, at last, adjourned, leaving the affair in the position in which they found it.

For several days this subject continued to agitate the House. Mr. Adams not only warded off the virulent attacks made upon him, but carried the war so effectually into the camp of his enemies, that, becoming heartily tired of the contest, they repeatedly endeavored to get rid of the whole subject by laying it on the table. To this Mr. Adams objected. He insisted that it should be thoroughly canvassed. Immense excitement ensued. Call after call of the House was made. Mr. Henry A. Wise, who was, at the time, engaged on the Reuben Whitney affair, was sent for, with an accompanying message that the stability of the Union was in danger!

Breathless, and impatient, Mr. Wise made his appearance, and inquired what was the matter. He was informed.

"And is that all?" ejaculated Mr. Wise. "The gentleman from

Massachusetts has presented a petition signed by slaves! Well, sir, and what of that? Is anybody harmed by it? Sir, in my opinion, slaves are the very persons who should petition. Mine, sir, pray to me, and I listen to them; and shall not the feeble supplicate? Sir, I see no danger,—the country, I believe, is safe."

At length the exciting subject was brought to a termination, by the passage of the following preamble and resolutions; much softened, it will be seen, in comparison with the measures first proposed:—

"An inquiry having been made by an honorable gentleman from Massachusetts, whether a paper which he held in his hand, purporting to be a petition from certain slaves, and declaring themselves to be slaves, came within the order of the House of the 18th of January,\* and the said paper not having been received by the Speaker, he stated that in a case so extraordinary and novel, he would take the advice and counsel of the House.

"Resolved, That this House cannot receive said petition without disregarding its own dignity, the rights of a large class of citizens of the South and West, and the Constitution of the United States.

"Resolved, That slaves do not possess the right of petition secured to the citizens of the United States by the constitution."

The slave petition is believed to have been a counterfeit, manufactured by certain members from slaveholding States, and was sent to Mr. Adams by the way of experiment—with the double design of ascertaining if he could be imposed upon; and, if the deception succeeded, those who got it up were curious to know if the venerable statesman would redeem his pledge, and present a petition, no matter who it came from. He was too wily not to detect the plot at the outset; he knew that all was a hoax; but, he resolved to present the paper, and then turn the tables on its authors.†

On the 20th of December, 1838, Mr. Adams presented a petition praying for the establishment of international relations with the Republic of Hayti, and moved that it be referred to the Committee

\* This order was the same as that adopted by the House on the 18th of May, 1836. See p. 281.

† Reminiscences of the late John Quincy Adams, by an Old Colony Man.



on Foreign Affairs, with instructions to consider and report thereon. This motion was opposed with great warmth by members from slaveholding States. Mr. Adams was repeatedly interrupted during the delivery of the brief speech he made on the occasion.

Mr. Bynum insisted that the gentleman from Massachusetts should take his seat, under the rule. If, however, he was permitted to proceed, Mr. B. hoped some gentleman of the slaveholding portion of the House would be allowed to answer him.

*Mr. Adams.*—Sir, I hope so. Only open our mouths, gentlemen; that is all we ask, and you may answer as much as you please.

*Mr. Bynum.*—I object to the gentleman proceeding further with his observations, except by consent of the House. If we have rules we had better either obey them or burn them.

The House voted, by 114 to 47, to allow Mr. Adams to proceed.

In continuing his speech, Mr. Adams said, that even admitting the object of the petitioners is abolition, as has been alleged, they had the right to petition for that too; for every individual in the country had a right to be an abolitionist. The great men of the Revolution were abolitionists, and if any man denies it, I will prove it.

*Mr. Wise.*—I deny it.

The Speaker said this was out of order.

*Mr. Adams.*—I feel obliged to the gentleman from Virginia for giving me the invitation, and I will now prove what I say.

The Speaker said this did not form any part of the question before the House.

*Mr. Adams.*—George Washington, *in articulo mortis*, by his last will and testament, before God, his Creator, emancipated his slaves.

*Mr. Wise.*—Because he had no children.

The Speaker again interposed, and said the gentleman could not go into that question. It was entirely out of order.

*Mr. Adams.*—I did but accept the invitation of the gentleman from Virginia. I do not wish to go further. I simply take the position that George Washington was an abolitionist in the most extensive sense of the term; and I defy any man in this House to the discussion, and to prove to the contrary if he can.

The Speaker called Mr. Adams to order.

*Mr. Adams.*—Well, sir, I was stating the high authority which is to be found for the principles of abolition. Does the gentleman from Virginia deny that Thomas Jefferson was an abolitionist?

*Mr. Wise.*—I do.

The Speaker again interposed.

*Mr. Adams.*—Well, sir, then I come back to my position, that every man in this country has a right to be an abolitionist, and that in being so he offends no law, but, in my opinion, obeys the most sacred of all laws.

The motion to instruct the committee, was finally laid upon the table.

Mr. Adams was evidently anxious to engage in a legitimate discussion, in the House of Representatives, of the subject of slavery in all its bearings, influences, and results. Such a discussion, coolly and deliberately entered upon, by men of the most distinguished abilities in the nation, could not but have been pregnant with lasting good, not only to the North, but also to the South and the entire country. To afford opportunity for a dignified and profitable investigation of this momentous topic, Mr. Adams, on the 25th of Feb., 1839, proposed the following amendments to the Constitution of the United States:—

*“Resolved, by the Senate and House of Representatives in Congress assembled, two-thirds of both Houses concurring therein, That the following amendments to the Constitution of the United States be proposed to the several States of the Union, which, when ratified by three-fourths of the legislatures of said States, shall become and be a part of the Constitution of the United States:—*

*“1. From and after the 4th day of July, 1842, there shall be throughout the United States no hereditary slavery; but on and after that day, every child born within the United States, their territories or jurisdiction, shall be born free.*

*“2. With the exception of the territory of Florida, there shall henceforth never be admitted into this Union, any State, the constitution of which shall tolerate within the same the existence of slavery.*



"3. From and after the 4th day of July, 1845, there shall be neither slavery nor slave trade, at the seat of Government of the United States."

Instead of meeting and canvassing, in a manly and honorable manner, the vitally important question involved in these propositions, the slaveholding Representatives objected to its coming before the House for consideration, in any form whatever. In this instance, as in most others, where the merits of slavery are involved, the supporters of that institution manifested a timidity, a want of confidence in its legitimacy, of the most suspicious nature. If slavery is lawful and defensible—if it violates no true principle among men, no human right bestowed by the Creator—if it can be tolerated and perpetuated in harmony with republican institutions and our Declaration of Independence—if its existence in the bosom of the Confederacy involves no incongruity, and is calculated to promote the prosperity and stability of the Union, or the welfare of the slaveholding States themselves—these are facts which can be made evident to the world, by the unsurpassed abilities of southern statesmen. Why, then, object to a candid and fearless investigation of the subject? But if slavery is the reverse of all this—if it is a moral poison, contaminating and blighting everything connected with it, and containing the seeds of its own dissolution sooner or later—why should wise, sagacious politicians, prudent and honest men, and conscientious Christians, shut their eyes and turn

away from a fact so appalling and so dangerous. No man of intelligence can hope, in this age of the world, to perpetuate that which is wrong and destructive, by bravado and threatening—by refusing to look it in the face, or to allow others to scrutinize it. Error must pass away. Truth, however unpalatable, or however it may be obscured for a season, must eventually triumph. The very exertions of its supporters to perpetuate wrong, will but hasten its death.

"Truth, crushed to earth, will rise again;  
Th' eternal years of God are hers:  
But Error, wounded, writhes with pain,  
And dies among her worshippers."

Notwithstanding the course Mr. Adams felt himself compelled to pursue led him frequently into collision with a large portion of the Members of the House of Representatives, and caused them sometimes, in the heat of excitement, to forget the deference due his age, his experience, and commanding abilities, yet there was ever a deep, under-current feeling of veneration for him, pervading all hearts. Those who were excited to the highest pitch of frenzy by his proceedings, could not but admire the singleness of his purpose, and his undaunted courage in discharging his duties. On all subjects aside from slavery, his influence in the House has never been surpassed. Whenever he arose to speak, it was a signal for a general abandonment of listlessness and inattention. Members dropped their



newspapers and pamphlets—knots of consulting politicians in different parts of the Hall were dissolved—Representatives came hastily in from lobbies, committee-rooms, the surrounding grounds—and all eagerly clustered around his chair to listen to words of wisdom, patriotism, and truth, as they dropped burning from the lips of “the old man eloquent!” The confidence placed in him in emergencies, was unbounded. A case in point is afforded in the history of the difficulty occasioned by the double delegation from New Jersey.

On the opening of the 26th Congress, in December, 1839, in consequence of a two-fold delegation from New-Jersey, the House was unable, for some time, to complete its organization, and presented to the country and the world the perilous and discreditable aspect of the assembled Representatives of the people, unable to form themselves into a constitutional body. On first assembling, the House has no officers, and the Clerk of the preceding Congress acts, by usage, as chairman of the body, till a Speaker is chosen. On this occasion, after reaching the State of New Jersey, the acting Clerk declined to proceed in calling the roll, and refused to entertain any of the motions which were made for the purpose of extricating the House from its embarrassment. Many of the ablest and most judicious members had addressed the House in vain, and there was nothing but confusion and disorder in prospect.

The fourth day opened, and still confusion was triumphant. But the hour of disenthralment was at hand, and a scene was presented which sent the mind back to those days when Cromwell uttered the exclamation—“Sir Harry Vane! wo unto you, Sir Harry Vane!”—and in an instant dispersed the famous Rump Parliament.

Mr. Adams, from the opening of this scene of confusion and anarchy, had maintained a profound silence. He appeared to be engaged most of the time in writing. To a common observer, he seemed to be reckless of everything around him—but nothing, not the slightest incident, escaped him. The fourth day of the struggle

had now commenced; Mr. Hugh H. Garland, the Clerk, was directed to call the roll again.

He commenced with Maine, as was usual in those days, and was proceeding toward Massachusetts. I turned, and saw that Mr. Adams was ready to get the floor at the earliest moment possible. His keen eye was riveted on the Clerk; his hands clasped the front edge of his desk, where he always placed them to assist him in rising. He looked, in the language of Otway, like the

“————— fowler, eager for his prey.”

“New Jersey!” ejaculated Mr. Hugh H. Garland, “and the Clerk has to repeat that ———”

Mr. Adams sprang to the floor!

“I rise to interrupt the Clerk,” was his first ejaculation.

“Silence, silence,” resounded through the hall; “hear him, hear him! Here what he has to say; hear John Quincy Adams!” was the unanimous ejaculation on all sides.

In an instant, the most profound silence reigned throughout the Hall—you might have heard a leaf of paper fall in any part of it—and every eye was riveted on the venerable Nestor of Massachusetts—the purest of statesmen, and the noblest of men! He paused for a moment; and, having given Mr. Garland a

“————— withering look!”

he proceeded to address the multitude:

“It was not my intention,” said he, “to take any part in these extraordinary proceedings. I had hoped that this House would succeed in organizing itself; that a Speaker and Clerk would be elected, and that the ordinary business of legislation would be progressed in. This is not the time, or place, to discuss the merits of the conflicting claimants for seats from New Jersey; that subject belongs to the House of Representatives, which, by the constitution, is made the ultimate arbiter of the qualifications of its members. But what a spectacle we here present! We degrade and disgrace ourselves; we degrade and disgrace our constituents and the country. We do not, and cannot organize; and why? Because the Clerk of this House, the mere Clerk, whom we create, whom we employ, and whose existence depends upon our will, usurps the throne, and sets us, the Representatives, the vicegerents of the whole



American people, at defiance, and holds us in contempt! And what is this Clerk of yours? Is he to control the destinies of sixteen millions of freemen? Is he to suspend, by his mere negative, the functions of Government, and put an end to this Congress? He refuses to call the roll! It is in your power to compel him to call it, if he will not do it voluntarily. [Here he was interrupted by a member, who said that he was authorized to say that compulsion could not reach the Clerk, who had avowed that he would resign, rather than call the State of New Jersey.] Well, sir, then let him resign," continued Mr. Adams, "and we may possibly discover some way by which we can get along, without the aid of his all-powerful talent, learning and genius. If we cannot organize in any other way—if this Clerk of yours will not consent to our discharging the trusts confided to us by our constituents, then let us imitate the example of the Virginia House of Burgesses, which, when the colonial Governor Dinwiddie ordered it to disperse, refused to obey the imperious and insulting mandate, and, *like men*——"

The multitude could not contain or repress their enthusiasm any longer, but saluted the eloquent and indignant speaker, and intercepted him with loud and deafening cheers, which seemed to shake the capitol to its centre. The very Genii of applause and enthusiasm seemed to float in the atmosphere of the Hall, and every heart expanded with an indescribable feeling of pride and exultation. The turmoil, the darkness, the very "chaos of anarchy," which had, for three successive days, pervaded the American Congress, was dispelled by the magic, the talismanic eloquence of a single man; and, once more the wheels of Government and of Legislation were put in motion.\*

Having, by this powerful appeal, brought the yet unorganized assembly to a perception of its hazardous position, he submitted a motion requiring the acting Clerk to proceed in calling the roll. This and similar motions had already been made by other members. The difficulty was, that the acting Clerk declined to entertain them. Accordingly, Mr. Adams was immediately interrupted by a burst of voices demanding, "How shall the question be put?" "Who will put the question?" The voice of Mr. Adams was heard above the tumult, "I intend to put the question myself!" That word brought order out of chaos. There was the master mind.

\* Reminiscences—by an Old Colony Man.

As soon as the multitude had recovered itself, and the excitement of irrepressible enthusiasm had abated, Mr. Richard Barnwell Rhett, of South Carolina, leaped upon one of the desks, waved his hand, and exclaimed:

"I move that the Honorable John Quincy Adams take the chair of the Speaker of this House, and officiate as presiding officer, till the House be organized by the election of its constitutional officers! As many as are agreed to this will say *ay*; those ——"

He had not an opportunity to complete the sentence—"those who are not agreed, will say *no*,"—for one universal, deafening, thundering *ay*, responded to the nomination.

Hereupon, it was moved and ordered that Lewis Williams, of North Carolina, and Richard Barnwell Rhett, conduct John Quincy Adams to the chair.

Well did Mr. Wise, of Virginia, say, "Sir, I regard it as the proudest hour of your life; and if, when you shall be gathered to your fathers, I were asked to select the words which, in my judgment, are best calculated to give at once the character of the man, I would inscribe upon your tomb this sentence, 'I will put the question myself.'"\*

\* In a public address, Mr. Adams once quoted the well known words of Tacitus, *Annal. vi. 39*—"Par negotiis neque supra"—applying them to a distinguished man, lately deceased. A lady wrote to inquire whence they came. Mr. Adams informed her, and added, that they could not be adequately translated in less than seven words in English. The lady replied that they might be well translated in five—*Equal to, not above, duty*—but better in three—JOHN QUINCY ADAMS.—*Massachusetts Quarterly Review*.