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THE

WHIGS OF MASSACHUSETTS.

BY

WILLIAM S. APPLETON.

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THE WHIGS OF MASSACHUSETTS.

I HAVE undertaken, with some hesitation, to put together a few thoughts on the subject of the Whigs of Massachusetts, particularly in the years between 1840 and 1850; and I take as a sort of text some words from a letter of Nathan Appleton to Charles Sumner, dated 4 September, 1848: "I have regretted your course the last two years. But more in sorrow than in anger." I may be considered to labor under a disadvantage in having been only a boy even at the later date, 1850. But there are circumstances which perhaps go far to offset this disadvantage, in personal and family relations. My father, Nathan Appleton, was at this time one of the leaders among the older Whigs in the State, whose words were heard with attention, and whose counsels were received with respect. Robert C. Winthrop was a friend of my father, perhaps as intimate as is ever the case where a difference of thirty years exists, and Winthrop's second wife was a dearly loved own cousin of my mother. I remember being often at their house in Pemberton Square, and feeling perfectly at home there; and Mr. Winthrop's name still lingers in my memory with the familiar title of Colonel, derived from his service on the staff of Governor Everett. The father of Charles Sumner was, except in the eye of the law and the genealogist, also an own cousin of my mother; and the irregularity of his birth was as completely ignored by all the Sumner family as if it never existed. Charles Sumner was, till 1846, a most welcome and beloved guest in my father's house, though of his presence there I am sorry to say I have no definite recollection.

These facts are my reason and my excuse for venturing to offer some views on the Whigs of my boyhood, especially as to their personal relations. Mr. Pierce has drawn, with great skill and fairness, the sad picture of the breaking of social ties, but it did not come within the scope of his work to consider the hearts of those from whom Sumner separated himself. He voluntarily caused the separation, from motives which I have no thought of questioning or criticising. They are undoubtedly considered to do him honor. But it was not in human nature, as we know it, for those whom he left to have acted otherwise than as they did, and I presume that no one blames them for having resented Sumner's acts and words.

The Whig party existed under that name for a little less than the quarter century between 1830 and 1855. It was successful in only two presidential elections, — 1840 and 1848; and the former of these, seemingly a triumph, was the barrenest sort of victory. The laurels turned to the bitterest ashes. It only had complete control of the national government, President, Senate, and House of Representatives, for the month's presidency of William Henry Harrison. During the next twenty-three months its nominal rule was of the most uncertain kind, and never after did it hold more than two of the three co-ordinate branches of the American Parliament. It was strong in several States, among which Massachusetts stood high, — one of the faithful four which voted against Pierce in 1852. In 1840 it was at first hopeful of victory, and then flushed with the victory it had won.

At that time among the older Whigs, leaders of the party, more particularly in Eastern Massachusetts, were Webster, Davis, Lincoln, Gorham, Lawrence, Everett, and my father, few of whom, if any, were really old men. Adams, Winthrop, Hillard, Curtis, Sumner, and Motley were the leaders of a group of young men, to whom the elders looked for their successors, who should perpetuate all that was good and honorable in the record of the party, and who should carry it on to greater good and higher honor in the future. In the case of the three men of whom I first spoke, Nathan Appleton on one side, Winthrop and Sumner on the other, a stronger feeling existed, and political sympathy and pride were mingled with deep personal admiration and affection. A few years earlier Phillips would have held a place second to none of the younger men. And

when Phillips was joined by Adams and Sumner, the older men had reason for anxious thought and grief. The personal separation had come, even if political prospects seemed as yet undimmed; and it is the personal separation which I have most in mind, and which I wish to emphasize. Sumner might sadly say, "There was a time when I was welcome at almost every house within two miles of us, but now hardly any are open to me." But the occupants of those houses might say with equal or greater sadness, "There was a time when Charles Sumner was gladly welcomed here as guest, but he has left us." It may be that those whose life was less in the future than the past were the more to be pitied.

The Whigs of Massachusetts did not approve of slavery; on the contrary, many of them had denounced it in the strongest terms, and would gladly have seen its end. But they looked on it as an unavoidable condition of the existence of the Union, which seemed to them worthy of almost every kind of sacrifice. In comparison with its preservation the rights of the black race seemed small indeed, and might be left to the wisdom of a Divine Providence, which should turn the Southern States to a better way.¹

In such circumstances Charles Sumner announced that he could no longer act with the Whig party, and condemned its leaders and their acts in very strong words. His great abilities and fine qualities were not accompanied by an appreciation of the force of the English language. Small wonder then that Winthrop, his as yet more successful contemporary, broke forth in words of bitter indignation. Small wonder that an older man wrote, "I have regretted your course the last two years. But more in sorrow than in anger." My father felt that their deep friendship and familiar intercourse had come to a full stop. Neither Winthrop nor Appleton were man, had he acted otherwise than as he did. Fortunate were they, to whom political antagonism was as nothing in comparison with other sympathies. Prescott among his books was almost to be en-

¹ Nathan Appleton wrote in 1851: "His [Sumner's] views on the slavery question if adopted by the people of the north will certainly lead to a dissolution of the Union, and nearly as certainly to a civil war & bloodshed, & with great probability to a general massacre of the blacks. . . . So much for slavery & negroedom. I prefer to leave them to the wise God who made them rather than to excite our passions, and perhaps cut our throats, about a matter which so little concerns ourselves."

vied; one would say wholly to be envied, but for his sad physical infirmity. He could enjoy equally the friendship of Ticknor on the one hand, and of Sumner on the other. But not to many was such good fortune given.

The Whig party of Massachusetts was rent in twain. Victorious later in 1852 and 1853, these successes were but the last struggles of the dying body. But when it fell, Massachusetts fell a long way with it. Neither the Commonwealth nor the Whigs claimed to be omniscient; but both fell at the blow — shall we say the foul blow? — of a party which lives in history under the name of Know Nothing. Massachusetts rose again; the Whig party could not. With whatever of merit it may claim, with whatever of fault it would gladly disown, its course was run, its record was closed.

But in 1861 where were the survivors of the Whigs of Massachusetts? I think we can understand what their feelings must have been. Grief and astoundment must have contended for the mastery, — grief at the approach of that which they had devoted their lives to avert; astoundment that such madness had seized such numbers, and that their old friends at the South were powerless for good, if not even active for harm. But with, perhaps, no exception the Whigs of Massachusetts were among the most loyal of citizens. The addresses of Everett and Winthrop, on presenting flags respectively to the Twelfth and Twenty-second Regiments of Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, were not surpassed for lofty patriotism. Right by the side of Webster's words, "Not a stripe erased or polluted, nor a single star obscured," we may put, "A Star for every State, and a State for every Star." My father, lying on his bed of death, could do nothing but contribute freely of his abundant means. His cousin William Appleton, — perhaps, except Crittenden, the last Whig in public life, — victorious over Burlingame the previous autumn, at the age of seventy-four resumed his old seat in the House of Representatives at the extra session of July, and without hesitation gave his vote for Galusha A. Grow as Speaker. Devoting all his energies to his work on the Committee of Ways and Means in the heat of a Washington summer, he returned home only to resign his seat, and in a few months to die of simple physical exhaustion, caused by his faithful labors.

I have written these words not by way of vindication of the

old Whigs of Massachusetts, for they need no vindication, and I have less than no claim to be their vindicator. But I have long felt that some such statement as I have tried to make ought to be made, and I know not where to find it. It hardly lay in the province of the biographer of Webster or Lawrence ; still less in that of the biographer of Sumner. There is a suggestion of some such tribute in Dana's Address on the Life and Services of Everett. The Whigs were faithful to their duty as they saw it, and to their country, for they loved it. But few, very few, so far as I know, are the words which have been spoken or written to do them honor. I have tried to do something to this end, without injustice to those who left them. Would that the pleasant duty had fallen into abler hands !

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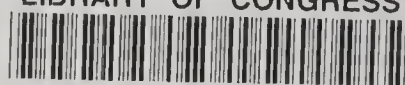


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