

THE  
AMERICAN JEW  
AS  
PATRIOT, SOLDIER AND CITIZEN

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Pages 87-97

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A Page from the Secret History of the Civil War.

As a fitting prelude to the record of Jewish activity in the War of the Rebellion, there may be cited here an episode in its history which has had no counterpart in the course of the world's affairs. Recondite and romantic incidents are present in the annals of all nations, and the history of the Jewish people especially is fraught with many striking instances of unhoped and unexpected deliverance from impending calamity, but they were largely the outcome of times and conditions widely at variance with those of the present day. The narrative of Haym Salomon's sacrifice in behalf of American freedom and the cause of human liberty forms a singular chapter in the annals of the American Revolution. But a yet more remarkable incident, one that appears wholly foreign to the *laissez-faire* spirit of our modern time, and which is likely in the future to centre a much greater degree of attention than it has yet received, is a transaction that has but lately become part of the history of the Civil War.

On October 2, 1863, the British Government seized in the shipyard of the Lairds, at Birkenhead, two armored vessels which had ostensibly been built for the government of China, but which, according to constantly reiterated reports, had been built for the Southern Confederacy in rebellion against the United States. The contemporary chronicles of the Civil War contain at most only such reports of that incident as became public in the course of the controversy over the subject, but the inner details of the occurrence, notable enough even in its most obvious features, remained for many years a diplomatic secret until revealed by the then Register of the Treasury, Mr. L. E. Chittenden, in his "Recollections of President Lincoln."

The two vessels had indeed been embargoed by the British Government, but under conditions which had been settled upon by the advisers of the Crown with the almost clearly manifest purpose of permitting the vessels to escape, while at the same time apparently complying with the requirements of international law and the representations of the American Minister. The

sympathies of the ruling powers in Great Britain were strongly with the Southern cause; the fact that the success of that cause meant the perpetuation of negro slavery, against which the English people had constantly inveighed, was held by many of the leaders of the party in power to be of small moment in comparison with the advancement of British interests, which these leaders believed would result from the disruption of the American Republic. They were accordingly ready to take advantage of virtual breach of international comity and law, under cover of a technical compliance with its provisions, and incur the risk of all the terrible outcome of a war between the two great Anglo-Saxon nations of the World. That such a war would surely have resulted if the two armored corsairs had eventually been let loose upon this country, no student of history can doubt. It was being busily fomented by that arch enemy, both of England and America, Napoleon III., who had assiduously been seeking an adequate pretext to recognize the independence of the Confederate States. He was actively conferring with British parliamentary leaders with the purpose of a joint intervention in our struggle, and if these ships were liberated to prey upon our commerce, lift the blockade of the Confederate ports, weaken the Federal power and strengthen that of the Rebellion, he would then assuredly be able to build up his empire in Mexico. That empire was already planted on the soil of the Mexican Republic, and the triumph of the Southern cause meant the success of the foolhardy and villainous undertaking which Napoleon III had established under Maximilian. If the outcome of British co-operation for the disruption of the American Union were eventually to be a war between England and the United States, it would but be further grist for the mill of the French usurper.

From all of this procession of possible and unmeasured evils it appears that the world was saved through the timely and powerful interposition of a single will. It was the will of a man who manifestly near enough to the mainspring of affairs to be aware of its primary movements, who was yet so hidden from public view that his action would remain as secret as he himself determined it to be; whose purpose was clearly in opposition to the motives of the ruling powers, and who possessed the means with which to effect his purpose.

Who was it that so signally changed the current of the world's affairs? Whose influence yet remains as mysterious as it was far-reaching? The question has been often asked and still remains unanswered. He still remains unnamed on the page of history. His position, his motive and his means of action appear to be defined, and it was clearly with these considerations in view that Mr. Chittenden wrote the letter which is here subjoined. The "process of exclusion" to which he so pointedly adverts leaves but very few among whom he is to be sought, and to the almost unerring indication which Mr. Chittenden has given is to be added a still nearer one which the author of the present work obtained from another source. Miss Kate Chase, daughter of Salmon P. Chase, the then Secretary of the Treasury, while assuring Mr. Wolf that the name of the form him that the man was a Jew. That it was a Jew, one well known for his outspoken admiration and love for our country as the home of religious liberty, a man who was not of the unsympathetic government, nor of this remarkable occasion, and his identity can scarcely be misinterpreted in the light of Mr. Chittenden's indications.

The following is a copy of Mr. Chittenden's letter, which may well serve as an author's preface to the chapter of his "Recollections" to which it refers, in which the incident is narrated in detail, and which we shall quote in full:

11 Pine St., New York, May 7, 1892.

Dear Sir:--

It would give me great pleasure to answer your letter of April 26<sup>th</sup> and a large number of others on the same subject. You will readily see that the name may be reached by a process of exclusion as definitely as by its direct statement. The extraordinary character of the incident did not occur to me at the time, or I should probably suppressed it. As it is I have no alternative but silence.

However it gives me pleasure to say one thing. The experience of an active life now drawing to its close has taught me that race prejudices have no place in the heart of a true American, and I am certainly not conscious that I have ever entertained a shadow of them against any one of Hebrew origin. On the contrary I have found much in the history of that persecuted race to respect and admire. Illness has delayed this reply to your note.

Yours truly,

L. E. Chittenden

Mr. Simon Wolf,

Washington, D. C.

## A REMARKABLE EPISODE

Extract from "Recollections of President Lincoln  
And his Administration." By L. E. Chittenden,  
His Register of the Treasury.

(Chapter XXV, Pages 197-203. N. Y., Harper & Brothers, 1891.)

Mr. Charles Francis Adams (our minister) had for several weeks been aware, and had communicated the fact to his government, that the Messrs. Laird, extensive ship builders, were building at their yards in Birkenhard, near Liverpool, two armored vessels for the Confederate government. They were to be furnished with powerful engines, and capable of great speed. When completed they were to proceed to a small unfrequented British island in the West Indies, where they were to be delivered to the agents of the Confederacy. They were then to receive their armament, previously sent thither, take their crews on board, and then set forth on their piratical cruises, after the example of the *Alabama*. After sweeping our remaining commerce from the seas, by burning and sinking every merchantship bearing our flag, they were to come upon our own coast, scatter our blockading fleet, and open all the Southern ports to British commerce, which would no longer be required to take the great risk of breaking the blockade. This feat was to be accomplished by vessels which had never entered a Confederate port, nor, indeed, any harbor which was not covered by the British or some other flag which protected the ironclads against pursuit or capture by vessels of the United States Navy.

Greater danger than these vessels never threatened the safety of the Union. In tonnage, armament and speed, they were intended to be superior to the *Kearsarge*, and every other vessel of our navy. Their armor was supposed to render them invulnerable. If the blockade was not maintained, an immediate recognition of the belligerent character of the rebels by Great Britain was anticipated. Even if that did not take place, all the cotton gathered in Confederate ports would be released and find profitable market, while the old wooden vessels, now principally constituting the blockading fleet, would not resist one of these iron-clad vessels long enough for a second broadside.

The impending danger was fully appreciated by Mr. Adams. With his accustomed energy, notwithstanding the secrecy in which all the Confederate movements in Great Britain were shrouded, he had collected and laid before the English authorities clear proofs of the rebel ownership, and intended unlawful purpose of these vessels. He had even procured copies of the

contracts under which the Messrs. Laird were building them, and had ascertained that payments on their account had been made from proceeds of cotton owned by the Confederacy. He had represented that the evidence furnished by him, verified by the oaths of credible witnesses, was sufficient not only to justify their seizure, but to secure their condemnation in the courts, and he had insisted with a force apparently unanswerable, that it was the duty of Great Britain to prevent the vessels from leaving the Mersey and setting forth upon their piratical career.

But, unfortunately, the sympathies of the party in power in England were not with the Union cause. It suited the view of the law-officers of the Crown not to interfere, and to excuse their inaction by raising objections to the legal sufficiency of the evidence. The situation was perfectly comprehended by the President and his Cabinet, but remonstrance appeared to be unavailing, and the departure of the vessels was expected at an early day.

Hopeless as the task appeared to be, neither Mr. Adams nor his active agents relaxed their efforts for a moment. Their recent investigations had been prosecuted with such energy that the minister had finally been able to furnish the British premier with the sworn affidavits of some of the officers and men actually enlisted in Liverpool, and other English cities, for service on these vessels; that the advance payments to these men had been made by Confederate agents, that the ships were to leave the Mersey at an early appointed date for an island near Bermuda; that their guns and ammunition had already been sent thither. Mr. Adams had also secured the names of the ships' officers, with copies of their commissions, bearing the signature of President Davis and the seal of the Confederacy.

The last installment of affidavits forwarded by our minister proved to be more than the crown lawyers could digest. They covered every defect named in their former objections: they could not be answered even by a special demurrer. They were reinforced by the caustic pen of Mr. Adams, whose arguments so clearly pointed out the duty of the English government in the premises that it would obviously be regarded as conclusive by every one but these lawyers, who possessed the exclusive power to move the slow authorities of the customs to action. The crown lawyers finally decided that the demand of issue, prohibiting the departure of these vessels from the Mersey until the charges of the American minister had been judicially investigated.

There were, however, some incidents attending this most important decision, which prevented its communication from giving to Mr. Adams a satisfaction wholly unalloyed. The decision had been withheld until the vessels were on the very eve of departure. The order must be immediately served, and possession taken by the customs authorities, or the vessels would escape. The crown lawyers, properly enough, observed that the affidavits furnished by Mr. Adams were *ex-parte*—the witnesses had not been cross-examined. If Mr. Adams should fail to prove his charges by evidence which would satisfy the judicial mind, and the vessels be released, the damages caused by arresting them might be very heavy. It was a settled rule of procedure in the courts in such cases to secure the payment of such damages beyond any peradventure. The restraining order would, therefore, be issued, but it would not be enforced against the vessels until these damages had been secured by a deposit of £1,000,000 sterling *in gold coin*.

The situation was well known to be critical. Within three days the vessels were to sail for their destination; if necessary, they might sail forthwith. The cable was useless, broken or

disabled—and Mr. Adams could not communicate with his own government. Without such communication he had no authority to bind his government as an indemnitor, or to repay the money if he could borrow it. Even if he had the fullest authority, where was the patriotic Briton who would furnish a million pounds on the spur of the moment to a government which was believed by the party in power in Great Britain to be *in articulo mortis*? Unless, therefore, the crown lawyers supposed our minister to have anticipated their decision by providing himself with this money, they must have known that this condition could not be complied with, and that they might just as well have declined to interfere. If they had intended that these ships should not be prevented from making their intended crusade against our commerce and our cause, no better arrangement could possibly have been devised. It is not to be denied that suspicions existed that such was their purpose.

But the unexpected sometimes happens. The event which prevented these floating engines of destruction from entering upon their intended work was as unanticipated as a miracle. It constituted, possibly, the most signal service ever rendered by a citizen of one country to the government of another. It was all the more noble, because it was intended to be anonymous. The eminently unselfish man who performed it made a positive condition that it should not be made public, that not so much as his name should be disclosed, except to the officers of our government, whose co-operation was required in order to transact the business in a proper manner and upon correct principles. So earnest was his injunction of secrecy that his identity will not even now be disclosed, although he has long since gone to his reward.

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Within the hour after the crown layers' decision, with its conditions, had been made known to Mr. Adams, and when he had given up all hope of arresting these vessels, a quiet gentleman called upon him and asked if he might be favored with the opportunity of making the deposit of coin required by the order? He observed "that it had occurred to him that if the United States had that amount to its credit in London, some question of authority might arise, or Mr. Adams might otherwise be embarrassed in complying with the condition, especially as communication with his government might involve delay; so that the shortest way to avoid all difficulty would be for him to deposit the coin, which he was quite prepared to do."

Had a messenger descended from the skies in a chariot of fire, with \$5,000,000 in gold in his hands, and offered to leave it at the embassy without any security, Mr. Adams could not have been more profoundly surprised. He had accepted the condition as fatal to his efforts; he had concluded that nothing short of a miracle could prevent the departure of the vessels; and here, if not a miracle, was something much like one. He made no secret of the pleasure with which he accepted the munificent offer, provided some method of securing the liberal Englishman could be found. The latter seemed indisposed to make any suggestions on the subject. "It might be proper," he said, "that some obligation might be entered into, showing that the American government recognized the deposit as made on its account; beyond that he should leave the matter wholly in the hands of Mr. Adams."

The existing premium on gold was then about sixty percent in the United States. It would have been largely increased by the departure of these ironclads. The “five-twenties” or “sixes” of 1861, as they were popularly called, were then being issued, and were the only securities upon “long time” then authorized by Congress. The best arrangement that occurred to Mr. Adams and which he then proposed, was that \$10,000,000, or £2,000,000, in these bonds, to be held as collateral security for the loan of £1,000,000 in gold, should be delivered to the lender, to be returned when the loan was paid or the order itself was discharged and the coin returned to the depositor. The proposition of Mr. Adams was satisfactory to the gentleman, but he said that to prevent the disclosure of his name the deposit should be made in coupon and not in registered bonds. The coupons were payable to bearer; the registered were required to be inscribed on the books of the Treasury in the owner’s name.

Mr. Adams then volunteered the assurance that these bonds, to the amount of \$10,000,000, should be transmitted to London by the first steamer which left New York after his dispatch concerning the transaction was received at the State Department at Washington.

It was the assurance of Mr. Adams which the President and both of the Secretaries desired should be made good. They regarded the faith of the government as pledged for its performance, and that faith they proposed should not be violated.

All the details of this transaction were not then disclosed. They reached the government in private, confidential dispatches from Mr. Adams, some of them long afterwards. The dispatch in question was understood to be confidential; certainly that part of it which related to the deposit and security proposed. It was necessarily brief, for in order to reach the steamer the special messenger had to leave London within a very few hours after the proposition of the deposit was made. There was enough in it to show that an inestimable service had been rendered to the country by some one to whom Mr. Adams had pledged the faith of the nation for the transmission of these bonds by the next steamer which left New York. There was no dissent from the conclusion that the pledge of Mr. Adams, if it were in the power of the government, must be performed.

Since the publication of the foregoing facts in *Harper’s Magazine* for May, 1890, I have been solicited by many correspondents to give the name of the gentleman who offered to perform such a signal service to our country. It must be obvious that nothing could give greater pleasure than to publish his name, and to secure for him the enduring gratitude of the American People. I have, however, a special reason for my present determination not to disclose it, nor to permit myself to speculate upon to consequences of the disclosure. When we were informed that the emergency had passed, it became necessary to make a change in the entries of this large amount upon the books of the register. This was found to be a difficult matter, unless a plain statement of the issue, to the gentleman in question, and its purpose was made with its subsequent cancellation. This course I proposed to Secretary Chase. He was decided in his opinion that the value of the service would not have been enhanced if an actual deposit of the money had been required, and that as the gentleman himself had imposed the obligation, he was the only authority who could possibly release it. While I regarded his conclusion as incontrovertible, I did suggest that our first

duty was the official one, to our own obligation to conceal nothing, and to make our official records strictly conform to the fact.

“We should have thought of that at the time,” said the Secretary. “We might have declined his offer, coupled as it was with the obligation to conceal his name, but I do not remember that we considered that question. Do you?”

“No,” I said. “Nothing was discussed in my presence except the possibility of compliance with his conditions to the letter.”

“Then, I think, we must continue to keep his secret whatever the consequences may be, until he releases us from the obligation,” was the final conclusion of the Secretary.

I am, I believe, the only survivor of those to whom this gentleman’s name was known. I have hitherto declined to discuss the question of his name or its disclosure. I depart from my practice far enough to say that I do not believe he was interested in the price of cotton, or that he was moved in the slightest degree by pecuniary motives in making his offer. More than this, at present, I do not think I have the moral right to say. If I should at any time hereafter see my way clear to a different conclusion, I shall leave his name to be communicated to the Secretary of Treasury, who will determine for himself the propriety of its disclosure.