

LINCOLN LORE

Bulletin of the Lincoln National Life Foundation - - - - - Dr. Louis A. Warren, Editor.
Published each week by The Lincoln National Life Insurance Company, of Fort Wayne, Indiana.

No. 387

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

September 7, 1936

THE TRENT AFFAIR

The firing of a Spanish plane on an American ship and the diplomatic correspondence which has followed recalls an occasion seventy-five years ago when an American vessel fired a shot across the course of the British steamer Trent and upon her refusal to stop fired one across her bow which "brought her to."

"The Trent Affair," as it was called, occurred in December, 1861, at the beginning of civil strife in America. The Southern Confederacy was seeking recognition abroad and James M. Mason and John Slidell were commissioned to visit England and France respectively to secure the good will of those countries. They were successful in running the Union Blockade and arrived in Havana. Here they took passage on an English owned steamer called Trent.

Captain Charles Wilkes in command of the U. S. steamer San Jacinto, which had been fitted with guns, learned of the presence of Mason and Slidell on the Trent and came upon the mail steamer shortly after she left port. Lieut. Fairfax after a heated conference with the captain of the Trent was successful in placing Mason, Slidell, and their secretaries under arrest and the Trent was allowed to proceed on her way.

The whole country was jubilant over the apprehension of the southern statesmen. The Cabinet generally approved of the seizure, and the Secretary of the Navy wrote a letter of commendation to Captain Wilkes. Lincoln, however, was greatly troubled as he immediately recognized the probability that international relations would be disturbed, and on the very day the news of the capture was received he made this observation:

"I fear the traitors will prove to be white elephants. We must stick to American principles concerning the rights of neutrals. We fought Great Britain for insisting, by theory and practice, on the right to do precisely what Captain Wilkes has done. If Great Britain shall now protest against the act, and demand their release, we must give them up, apologize for the act as a violation of our doctrines, and thus forever bind her over to keep the peace in relation to neutrals, and so acknowledge that she has been wrong for sixty years."

In a speech which Mr. Sumner made before the Senate on the question of the seizure, his introductory words indicate the seriousness of the decision:

"Every principle of international law, when justly and authoritatively settled, becomes a safeguard of peace and a landmark of civilization. It constitutes a part of that code which is the supreme law, above all municipal laws binding the whole commonwealth of nations."

With the country so enthusiastic over the capture of Mason and Slidell, Lincoln was obliged to move with caution else he destroy the morale of the people which he was trying constantly to build up, but his prophecy about international difficulties was to be substantiated. In fact practically every nation in Europe awaited the final outcome of "The Trent Affair," and its relation to international law.

On November 29, 1861, two days after the news of the capture had been received in England, Lord Palmerston in a message to the Queen said: "The Washington Government should be told that what has been done is a violation of international law and of the rights of Great Britain, and that your Majesty's government trusts that the act will be disavowed and the prisoners set free and restored to British protection."

The English press was very bitter in its denunciation of the United States and a comment in *Harper's Weekly* shows the English attitude of mind in "The Trent Affair":

"The British newspapers reach us full of fury and menace against this country. Our 'little fleet is to be swept from the seas;' 'the *San Jacintos*' are to be 'sunk or captured;' our blockade is to be broken at once; the 'Southern Confederacy' is to be 'acknowledged by Great Britain and France simultaneously;' our 'Northern ports are to be blockaded;' 'twelve Royal men-of-war' are to sail up the Potomac, and compel the return of Mason and Slidell in view of the White House; the *Warrior* is to be anchored off Annapolis, with shotted guns; we are to be taught the folly and danger of 'insulting the British flag.' All this, and much more, we are to suffer, according to those British journalists."

In the Second Series of his Bigelow Papers James Russell Lowell dedicates several verses to the belligerent spirit of John Bull. It appeared to Lowell as if England was unduly aggressive as he indicates by these lines:

"It don't seem hardly right, John,
When both my hands was full,
To stump me to a fight, John
Your cousin, tu, John Bull."

It is the reason put forth by Lowell for the return of the prisoners that is of more interest to us, however, as he seems quite sure that Lincoln was the moving spirit in the settlement of the difficulty:

"We give the critters back, John,
'Cause Abram thought 'twas right;
It warn't your bullying' clack, John,
Provokin' us to fight."

Nowhere does Lincoln's diplomacy show to greater advantage than in the handling of this case of international misunderstanding; and in it he was ably supported by Seward, whose final draft of the note to Great Britain is one of his outstanding state papers. The conclusion of this lengthy document by the Secretary of State is a frank admission that the United States was in error in detaining Mason and Slidell. It follows:

"I trust that I have shown to the satisfaction of the British Government, by a very simple and natural statement of the facts and analysis of the law applicable to them, that this Government has neither meditated, nor practised, nor approved any deliberate wrong in the transaction to which they have called its attention, and, on the contrary, that what has happened has been simply an inadvertency, consisting in a departure by the naval officer, free from any wrongful motive, from a rule uncertainly established, and probably by the several parties concerned either imperfectly understood or entirely unknown. For this error the British Government has a right to expect the same reparation that we, as an independent State, should expect from Great Britain or from any other friendly nation in a similar case . . . The four persons in question are now held in military custody at Fort Warren, in the State of Massachusetts. They will be cheerfully liberated."

There were certain advantages which the United States gained, however, which more than repaid for the humiliation experienced. All the nations of Europe and especially England and France were put on their good behavior for the rest of the war.

With respect to Mason and Slidell, while they continued on their good will missions to England and France, Lord Lyon wrote to the British Government:

"It is hardly necessary that I should remind you that these gentlemen have no official character. It will be all right for you to receive them with all courtesy and respect as private gentlemen of distinction; but it would be very improper to pay to them any of those honors which are paid to official persons."