

THE LAW OF PRESIDENTIAL CHANCES.

The Strange Accidents in the Political Lottery Wherby Great Men Failed: Clay, Calhoun, Webster, Seward, Tilden; and Wherby Lesser Men Succeeded: Tyler, Polk, Pierce, Johnson, Hayes—The Kind of Man Most Likely to Win.

[From The World's Work for November. Published in The Progressive Farmer by special permission.]

Accidents, circumstances beyond human control, and unlooked-for events have done more to seat most of our Presidents and to bar abler aspirants than all calculable influences and qualities. Hardly one of the great leaders who had already left his impress on our legislation and our public policy has been elected since the earlier days of the Constitution. With the exception of Jackson, W. H. Harrison, and Grant, none of the generally popular men has succeeded, and of these Harrison's was the popularity of an idea, and Grant's of a military hero. In fact, the history of nominating conventions and of elections shows that a man who has won only a moderate degree of fame and then waited for some happy turn of fortune has had by far the best chance of success.

To go back as far as the first election of Jefferson—Burr and Jefferson received an equal number of electoral votes. Then, of course, the man who received the largest number of electoral votes became President, and the man who received the next largest number, Vice-President. There was no choice in the Electoral College, and the election was thrown into the House of Representatives, where doubtless Jefferson would have failed of the first place had not an unexpected influence been brought to bear upon the contest. Hamilton, leader of the Federalists, and the last man from whom Jefferson could hope for help, preferred Jefferson as the less of two evils. Hamilton's purpose was not accomplished by directly securing Federalist votes for Jefferson, but the Federalist representatives from Vermont and the two from Maryland voted blank ballots, so that in the final ballot it appeared that ten States, a majority of those voting, had given Jefferson their ballots. There is no stranger, more dramatic episode in our political history than that Jefferson, the founder of the Republican party, as the Democratic party was then called, owed it to Hamilton, who was the personification of all that he opposed in political theory, that he succeeded John Adams in the Presidency.

CLAY'S FIRST FAILURE.

Madison and Monroe were, in succession, the predetermined heirs to Jefferson's political estate; but John Quincy Adams, who followed Monroe, was in some respects an accidental President. There were four candidates for the office in 1824—Adams, Jackson, Crawford, and Clay. Jackson had a majority of the popular vote; but there being no choice in the Electoral College the election again went to the House, which, under the Constitution, was to select one from the three candidates who had received the three largest votes. These were Adams, Jackson, and Crawford. Adams was the final choice of the House, but he owed his election to what seemed at the moment a comparatively trifling matter. The State legislatures at that time selected the presidential electors for the States. By what Clay's friends, termed outright political dishonesty, the legislature of Louisiana seized or made an opportunity during the absence of Clay's supporters from that body to vote for the presidential electors. These electors voted in the College, three for Jackson and two for Adams, whereas, had the election taken place when Clay's friends were present, the five electors would all have voted for Clay, and their votes in the Electoral College would have made Clay's electoral vote greater than Crawford's. He, then, instead of Crawford, would have been a candidate before the House; and in that event it is quite certain that Clay would have been elected President by the House, of which he was at that time easily the most popular member. Thus robbed of success, the friends of Clay in the House, acting upon the advice of their leader, gave their support to Adams, and he was elected.

HOW CALHOUN MISSED THE PRIZE.

It is not too much to say that death alone could have prevented the election of Jackson to the Presidency in 1828, or his re-election in 1832. But an unlooked-for incident, or combination of incidents, played a decisive part in the election of Van Buren in 1836. When Jackson first took office two men were prominent

as his possible successors. These were Clay and Calhoun. In fact, when Jackson was elected, it was understood that he should serve a single term, and that Calhoun, who, in 1824 and again in 1828, had been elected Vice-President almost without opposition, should become his successor. But this plan was never carried out. Crawford, who had not ceased to resent his defeat in 1824, for which, with or without reason, he held Calhoun chiefly responsible, now wrote to Van Buren, Jackson's Secretary of State, declaring that in Monroe's cabinet, of which both he and Calhoun had been members, Calhoun had proposed that Jackson's conduct in the Florida war (during which Jackson had, in fact, carried things with a high hand, as was his custom) he made the subject of inquiry, and that if the charges against him were proved, he be punished with severity. Van Buren showed this letter to his chief, and the friendship of Jackson for Calhoun changed at once to implacable enmity. From that day Calhoun was doomed as Jackson's successor.

Calhoun, of course, charged his loss of favor to Van Buren; and when Jackson sent Van Buren's name to the Senate as Minister to Great Britain, Calhoun, with Webster and Clay, set about defeating the nomination. He was rejected in the end, but with a result unforeseen, save by one astute Senator, who said, "You have broken a minister, but you have elected a Vice-President." His rejection did all that, and more, for it fixed in Jackson the determination to make Van Buren his successor in the Presidency. This resolve became plain when, in 1832, Van Buren was nominated and elected Vice-President. Four years later he succeeded Jackson in the chief magistracy.

Van Buren was again the candidate of his party in 1840, but, what with the panic of 1837 and the hard times that followed it, Whig success in that campaign was from the first a foregone conclusion. Again accident came into play to make a President. The sentiment of his party was decidedly in favor of the nomination of Clay, and he fully expected the honor; but half a dozen influential Whigs in New York and Pennsylvania deemed him unavailable because the anti-Masons made up a large portion of the opposition, and Clay was a Royal Arch Mason.

GENERAL SCOTT'S FATAL LETTER.

With Clay out of the field, the choice of the convention was narrowed down to General Harrison and General Scott, and the Virginia delegation was in a position to decide between them. But Scott had written a letter to Francis Granger, of New York, in which he evidently sought to conciliate the anti-slavery sentiment of that State. Granger showed it to Thaddeus Stevens, and permitted Stevens to use it his own way. The headquarters of the Virginia delegation, being the centre of attraction, were always crowded, and Stevens called there along with many others. Before leaving, he dropped Scott's letter on the floor, and it was soon discovered and its contents made known to the Virginians. That letter caused the Virginians to support Harrison and to reject Scott. The nomination was equivalent to an election.

TYLER INSTEAD OF WEBSTER WON.

Harrison's candidacy was as dramatic in its sequel as in its inception. Before the Whig convention met, Thurlow Weed urged Webster to take the nomination for Vice-President, but he rejected the suggestion with scorn. After Harrison's nomination Clay's friends were urged to name the candidate for Vice-President. They first offered the nomination to Watkins Leigh, of Virginia, who declined it. Then it was tendered to Nathaniel P. Tallmadge. Had he not put it aside, New York would have had three Presidents from the Vice-President's chair. Next, Samuel Southard, of New Jersey, had the offer of the nomination. He, too, refused it. At last some one remembered that John Tyler, of Virginia, had shed tears at Clay's defeat. As a result, Tyler was named for Vice-President, the delegates feeling that so devoted a follower of Clay on the ticket would go far to heal the wounds that the convention had caused. Thus by these curious combinations of accidents, for which he was in no way responsible, Tyler, through the death of Harrison, became President, after four men had declined the chance.

Van Buren should have been nominated by the Democratic conven-

tion in 1844. He had a clear majority, but the adoption of the two-thirds rule deprived him of this advantage over his rivals, and prolonged balloting produced much bad feeling between his supporters and the supporters of his chief competitor, Cass. On the eighth ballot forty-four delegates voted for James K. Polk, who up to that time had been mentioned only as a possible candidate for Vice-President; and on the succeeding ballot, he was unanimously nominated. Polk had been Speaker of the House, but he was not a man of any great national reputation. "The nomination," says Thomas H. Benton, "was a surprise and marvel to the country."

CLAY'S SECOND SLIP.

Clay was nominated by acclamation by the Whigs, but again an untoward accident blocked his path to the White House. The great Kentuckian, at an early stage of his career, had given serious personal offense to James G. Birney. The latter was conspicuous as an Abolitionist, and there was some trifling strength in the so-called Abolition party in the North. In New York State there were a few thousand scattered Abolitionists, and they met in a convention and nominated Birney for the Presidency. He did not wish to run, and the most intelligent of the Abolitionists were opposed to any organization; but there was at that time a general belief that Birney saw in his candidacy a chance to punish Clay. Birney therefore ran, and he had such revenge as caused the Whig party to lose the Presidency, for his popular vote of 62,300 was sufficient to turn New York and Michigan to the Democrats.

The sequel proved that Clay's political sun had set; for in 1848, when it was almost certain that the Whig candidate would be elected, he was put aside for Taylor, one of the heroes of a war which the Whigs had denounced as a crime.

WEBSTER'S SECOND CHANCE.

Webster, also, in 1848, missed his last opportunity to become President. Before the Whig convention met, Thurlow Weed again urged Webster to become the Whig candidate for Vice-President. Again he refused, and the nomination, after going begging, was finally given to Millard Fillmore. Taylor died soon after taking office, Fillmore became President, and Webster returned to Washington to serve him as Secretary of State, as he had similarly served the accidental Tyler twelve years before. In place of either of them he might have become President.

The unexpected befall in the Democratic convention of 1852. Cass, Buchanan, and Douglas were the leading candidates, but Cass's candidacy had the stigma of defeat; Buchanan lacked an attached personal following; and the envy and the personal hatreds caused by Douglas's brilliant career as a leader in the Senate prevented his nomination. There is little doubt that Daniel S. Dickinson, of New York, would have been nominated as a compromise candidate had he not peremptorily declined to allow his name to go before the convention, for the reason that he was pledged to Cass. Finally the Southern delegates said to the New Hampshire delegates that any New Hampshire Democrat upon whom they could agree would be supported by the South, and thus, after a protracted contest, Franklin Pierce was nominated. Pierce had been a soldier in the Mexican War and a member of the Senate, but was so little known beyond the borders of his own State that many Democrats had never heard his name. Scott, robbed of a nomination when he could have been elected twelve years before, was now made the standard-bearer of the Whigs. He met with one of the most overwhelming defeats on record, only four States voting for him in the Electoral College.

SEWARD'S DISAPPOINTMENT.

In 1856 Buchanan, for many years an active aspirant for the office, was chosen President, but the year 1860 wrecked the long cherished hopes of Douglas, John C. Breckinridge, and Seward. When the Republicans met in convention, the nomination of Seward seemed a foregone conclusion. But he had made a personal enemy of Horace Greeley, who was determined to defeat his nomination. As Greeley could not be chosen a delegate from New York, he appeared in the convention with the proxy of an Oregon member. He worked in season and out of season, undermining Seward's strength.

Greeley's arguments and the declaration of Andrew G. Curtin, then candidate for governor of Pennsylvania, that he could not carry his State in the October election if Seward was nominated, drove enough delegates from the eminent New Yorker to prevent his nomination; and Lincoln was named in his stead. BEN. BUTLER MIGHT HAVE BEEN PRESIDENT.

No name but Lincoln's was presented to the Republican convention in 1864, and from the first his re-election was never in serious doubt. But the abiding issue of that campaign, as the sequel proved, was the nomination and election of Andrew Johnson to the Vice-Presidency. Lincoln for good reasons preferred a War Democrat on the ticket with him, and his first selection was General Benjamin F. Butler. But Butler, when approached by an agent of the President, declined peremptorily to permit his name to be considered, and Johnson was finally selected as the most available man for the place. Butler refused because of his personal dislike of Lincoln. It was a costly refusal, for Johnson became President within a year.

Grant's nomination in 1868 and in 1872 were beyond the power of chance to prevent; but in 1876 the enmity of an angry man helped to defeat Blaine, the favorite of a majority of the members of his party, and brought about the unexpected nomination of Hayes. When Blaine was Speaker of the House of Representatives, James N. Tyner, a member of the House from Indiana, coveted the chairmanship of the committee on post offices and post roads. He asserted that Blaine promised him the place, and then, without warning, gave it to another. Facing the Speaker in his private room, he declared to Blaine that he should remember what he called his betrayal when Blaine should become a candidate, a year or two later, for the presidential nomination. Blaine laughed at him, it was then said; but Tyner, who had some influence in the politics of his State, was as good as his word. When in the Republican convention of 1876 it became apparent that Oliver P. Morton could not be nominated, the Indiana delegation decided to support Hayes, who up to that time had not been thought a probable candidate. Blaine's friends had counted upon Indiana when Morton was withdrawn; but Tyner turned them from Blaine to Hayes.

LATER ACCIDENTAL PRESIDENTS

By the Electoral Commission, whereby Hayes secured the presidential office, although Tilden received 250,000 majority of the popular vote, was completed the chain of unusual events whereby Hayes became President.

In 1880 Tilden was certainly the choice of his party. But in the confusion of the Democratic convention—confusion caused by a letter from Tilden expressing the wish that the convention should not renominate him (which the convention took seriously, however it was meant to be taken)—an eloquent speech by Daniel Dougherty, of Pennsylvania, caused the ill-starred nomination of Hancock. In the Republican convention Blaine, Sherman, and Grant were presented as candidates, but Garfield was chosen. Had he kept the purpose that he once formed,—not to attend the convention,—there is little likelihood that he would have been nominated. The surprises since 1880 may perhaps be said to include the first nominations of both Cleveland and Harrison.

Among the accidental or unexpected Presidents in this incomplete review are Tyler, Polk, Pierce, Johnson, Hayes, Arthur; and among the men who clearly missed the Presidency by chance or an unexpected turn of events are Clay, Calhoun, Scott, Webster, Seward, and Tilden, not to mention Benjamin F. Butler.

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