

The Spotted Hand, An Anecdote of John C. Calhoun



Editors Note: John C. Calhoun was in unique, and a powerful position in the South to bring about secession years before it actually occurred. It was fortunate for the United States that Calhoun changed his views on secession to Pro-Union, almost overnight. His change of heart on Union, delay southern secession until after Lincoln was in office. Had John C. Calhoun not changed his political position to Pro-Union, the timing of the Civil War, and American history, may have been very different indeed.

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The following story of John C. Calhoun's dream of General George Washington comes from the book, *The Civil War in Song and Story* published in 1865, by Frank Moore. It is a unique collection of almost 550

pages with two columns in small type of Civil War stories and songs collected from newspapers and personal accounts by Frank Moore editor of the "*The Rebellion Record*" and "*Diary of the American Revolution*." The title on the story of John C. Calhoun is called *The Spotted Hand, An Anecdote of John C. Calhoun*:

One morning, at the breakfast table, when I, an unobserved spectator, happened to be present, Calhoun was observed to gaze frequently at his right hand, and brush it with his left in a hurried and nervous manner. He did this so often that it excited attention. At length one of the persons comprising the breakfast party— his name I, think, is Toombs [Robert], and he is a member of Congress from Georgia — took upon himself to ask the occasion of Mr. Calhoun's disquietude.

"Does your hand pain you?" he asked Mr. Calhoun. To this Mr. Calhoun replied, in rather a hurried manner,— "Pshaw! It is nothing but a dream I had last night, and which makes me see perpetually a large black spot, like an ink blotch, upon the back of my right hand; an optical illusion, I suppose."

Of course these words excited the curiosity of the company, but no one ventured to beg the details of this singular dream until Toombs asked quietly,— "What was your dream like? I am not very superstitious about dreams; but sometimes they have a great deal of truth in them."

"But this was such a peculiarly absurd dream," said Mr. Calhoun, again brushing the back of his right hand; "however, if it does not intrude too much on the time of our friends, I will relate it to you." Of course the company were profuse in their expressions of anxiety to know all about the dream and Mr. Calhoun related it.

"At a late hour last night, as I was sitting in my room writing, engaged in writing, I was astonished by the entrance of a visitor, who, without a word, took a seat opposite me at my table. This surprised me, as I had given particular orders to the servant that I should on no account be disturbed. The manner in which the intruder entered, so perfectly self-possessed, taking his seat opposite me without a word, as though my room and all within it belonged to him, excited in me as much surprise as indignation. As I raised my head to look into his features, over the top of my shaded lamp, I discovered that he was wrapped in a thin cloak, which effectively concealed his face and features from my view; and as I raised by head, he spoke:—

"What are you writing, senator from South Carolina?" "I did not think of his impertinence at first, but answered him voluntarily,"— "I am writing a plan for the dissolution of the American Union." (You know, gentlemen, that I am expected to produce a plan in the event of certain contingencies.) To this the intruder replied, in the coolest manner possible,— "Senator from South Carolina, will you allow me to look at your hand, your right hand?"

"He rose, the cloak fell, and I beheld his face. Gentleman, the sight of that face struck me like a thunderclap. It was the face of a dead man whom extraordinary events had called back to life. The features were those of Gen. George Washington. He was dressed in the Revolutionary costume, such as you see on the Patent Office."

Here Mr. Calhoun paused, apparently agitated. His agitation, I need not tell you, was shared by the company. Toombs at length broke the embarrassing pause. "Well, what was the issue of this scene?" Mr. Calhoun resumed:—

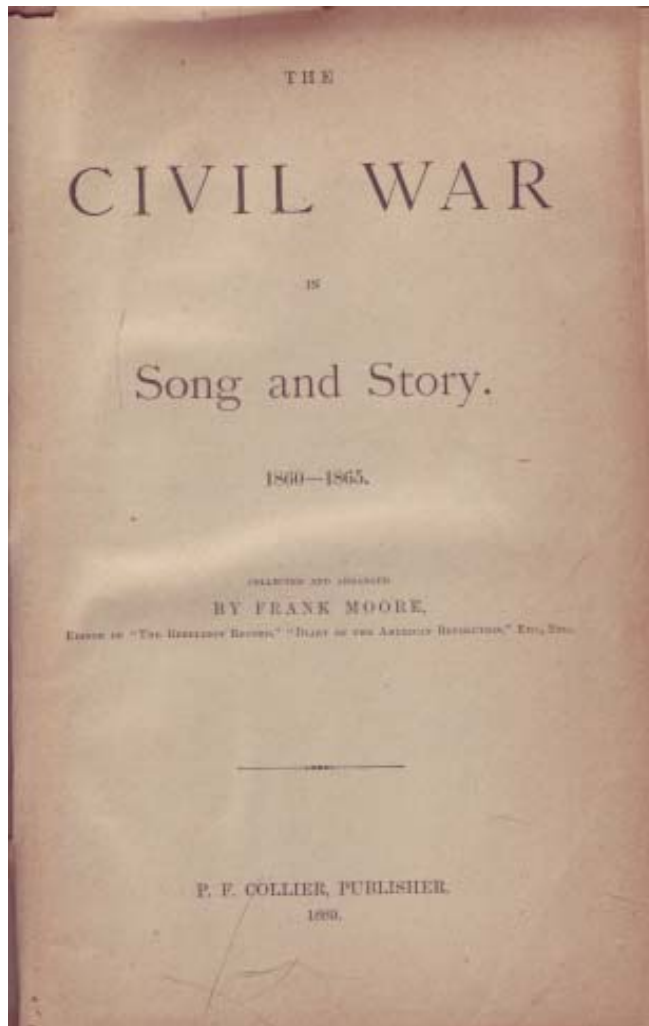
"The intruder, as I have said, rose and asked to look at my right hand. As though I had not the power to refuse, I extended it. The truth is, I felt a strange thrill pervade me at his touch; he grasped it, and held it near the light, thus affording full time to examine every feature. It was the face of Washington. After holding my hand for a moment, he looked at me steadily, and said in a quiet way," — "And

with this right hand, senator from South Carolina, you would sign your name to a paper declaring the Union dissolved?"

"I answered in the affirmative." "Yes," I said, if certain contingency arises, I will sign my name to the Declaration of Dissolution." "But at that moment a black blotch appeared on the back of my hand, which I seem to see now." "What is that?" said I, alarmed, I know not why, at the blotch on my hand." "That," said he, dropping my hand, "is the mark by which Benedict Arnold is known in the next world."

"He said no more gentlemen, but drew from beneath his cloak an object which he laid upon the table — laid upon the very paper on which I was writing. This object, gentlemen, was a skeleton." "There," said he, "there are the bones of Isaac Hayne, who was hung at Charleston by the British. He gave his life in order to establish the Union. When you put your name to the Declaration of Dissolution, why you may as well have the bones of Isaac Hayne before you—he was a South Carolinian, and so are you. But there is no blotch on his right hand."

"With these words the intruder left the room. I started back from the contact with the dead man's bones, and—awoke. Overcome by labor, I had fallen asleep, and had been dreaming. Was it not a singular dream?" All the company answered in the affirmative, and Toombs muttered, "Singular, very singular," at the same time looking curiously at the back of his right hand, while Mr. Calhoun placed his head between his hands, and seemed buried in thought.¹



Endnotes:

1. Moore, Frank, *The Civil War in Song and Story*, Page 30-31; P.F. Collier Publisher, 1889.
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