

INDEPENDENTS IN GEORGIA

THE NEW MOVEMENT AND ITS BITTER OPPONENTS.

DR. FELTON'S MANY CONTESTS THE HISTORY OF INDEPENDENTISM—THE LEADER'S QUALIFICATIONS—ANOTHER ASPIRING INDEPENDENT—GOV. BROWN'S POSITION.

AUGUSTA, Ga., Feb. 3.—Up to this time the Georgia Independents have been conducting a guerrilla warfare. There is no State organization and no Central Committee. Throughout the different Congressional districts Independent candidates have offered for Congress with varying success, and the supporters of such men have not been bound together by any tie save the single idea of opposing the organized Democracy. The difficulty of effecting a State organization has lain in the fact that there have been sprung no vital issues which could mark a line of division with the State Democracy, and the contests have been made upon purely personal grounds. There are not 200 people in Georgia who care about settling up the old repudiated bonds; there are thousands who believe in their hearts that the convict system ought to be abolished, but these are patient until some other method can be devised. The organized Democracy has taken somewhat advanced positions of late upon national questions and in abrogating restrictions upon the ballot, while financial matters are so complicated and indefinite that every man is almost a party unto himself. In 1876, when President Hayes appointed some highly respectable Democrats to office in Georgia, there were rumors of forming an Administration power for the State, but these appointees, while turning out generally to be good officers, were not men of political influence and organizing ability, and the abandonment by the President himself of his Southern policy soon closed up the breach in party ranks.

The history of Independentism in Georgia has thus far been the history of Feltonism; for Felton, more than any one man, has been warring upon the clans of McGregor, and piercing the rifts of the organized Democracy. To-day he is massing a strong following all over the State, and his recent Augusta speech, which will be followed by others in different parts of the State, is believed to be an opening gun for the next campaign. In 1874 the Hon. William H. Felton announced himself for Congress in his district as an Independent candidate against the Hon. L. M. Trammell, who had been President of the State Senate, and was a prominent politician, in the Seventh District of Georgia. Trammell, however, was too much of a politician and ring leader for the people, and Felton, a plain, honest Methodist minister of some shrewdness and power, made it so warm for Trammell as to drive him off the track before the election. This threw the party standard into the hands of the Hon. William K. Dabney, a man of integrity but of limited ability, and Dr. Felton was elected to Congress by a small majority. In 1876 the Hon. W. H. Dabney was accorded the Democratic nomination for being sacrificed before, but Dr. Felton, whose strength had increased with his service in Washington, was an easy victor. In 1878 all that Democratic organization could do was brought to bear against the redoubtable Independent in the Seventh District. Their nominating convention, which met at Dalton, united upon the Hon. George N. Lester, who was Judge upon the Blue Ridge Circuit bench, and was widely known in all that region. The latter is the compiler of the Code of Georgia, had been a gallant soldier, and through the campaign, it is said, waved his stump of an arm at Felton, but without conspicuous success. The Hon. Joseph E. Brown, now United States Senator, ran excursion trains up and down the Western and Atlantic Railroad through the heart of the district to facilitate the voters and workers of Lester. The campaign was red with abuse and misrepresentation all around, and the mountains of Cherokee, Georgia, probably were never the scenes of such bitter strife since the Army of the Cumberland drove Johnson from Chattanooga to Atlanta. Dr. Felton was elected, however, receiving the full Republican vote of the district, with a large Independent Democratic following. It was said at the time that he had the sympathy and substantial aid of Senator Ferry, of Michigan, and other prominent Republicans; certain it is, he carried the indorsement of prominent Southern politicians, including Senator Hill and Congressman Stephens.

In Congress Dr. Felton always acted with the Democrats, not being a regular attendant of the caucus, however. In finance he leans decidedly to the Western idea of Greenback issue, and repeatedly, in and out of Congress, has characterized the Government's system of financiering "a wrecking policy." His famous debate with ex-Congressman Chittenden, of Brooklyn, upon gold, silver, and greenbacks will be remembered, and was read and rehearsed in his district with fine effect. Upon the tariff Dr. Felton was probably the first Southern statesman who leaped to the front and contended that the protective policy was the policy for the South to support; that the North had grown rich in manufacture as England had done, and could the better afford to favor free trade than this region, whose factories and foundries, just springing up, were promising, and needed all the protection a high tariff could bring. He was opposed to "the tariff for revenue only" plank in the Democratic platform of 1880.

In 1879 the Democratic Party of Georgia was much exercised over the nomination for Census Enumerator of Simmons, who was supported by Dr. Felton, Mr. Stephens, and Senator Hill, and bitterly opposed by Senator Gordon. The nominee had been a Union man, was a Republican, and had been a bitter and uncompromising enemy in word and in deed to the Democracy of Georgia. The contest in the Senate was somewhat short and amusing, but the division in Georgia over this small appointment—relating to the attitude of certain national representatives—was aggravated and prolonged.

How Dr. Felton ever happened to be beaten for Congress in 1880 was a mystery. It has been said that he had grown tired of the bitter contests in his district, and, instead of delivering public speeches to the people, contented himself with going about through the mountains shaking hands and holding informal meetings with his friends. It has been hinted that he caused some of his followers to present his claims to the organized Democracy for a nomination, but the delegates were not in favor of making peace in this way. The convention of the Seventh District met in 1880 and nominated the Hon. J. W. Robertson, a prominent cotton manufacturer of Cobb County, who declined to stand. The convention, meeting a second time, put before the people the Hon. Judson C. Clements, a young man, who had been in the State House of Representatives and Senate. This gentleman adopted Dr. Felton's tactics of "still hunting," and the campaign of 1880 was the quietest ever known. Few speeches were made; no abuse was indulged in; the candidates never met in their rounds, and nobody thought much of Clements until election day, when he came out 800 hundred votes ahead. It was said that the over-confidence of the Doctor, the estrangement of much of the Republican vote, and the quiet, effective work of Clements did the business.

Dr. Felton, then, is recognized as the father of Independentism in Georgia. He is a strong, clean man, and is powerful on the stump. He possesses a voice which is as strong as a fog-horn, and could be heard through forest and canebrakes. He has great power over the masses, is enough of a demagogue to be popular, and is particularly effective in pulpit oratory, which he uses from the stump with greater force than Gen. Colquitt, and "the hallelujah lick of parson Felton" is tocsin-like in the mountains of Georgia. He has put forth a plausible platform—genteel and gingerly enough for Democrats to embrace and vague enough for Republicans to indorse. The Doctor's weak point is his evident inflated scheme of finance, with constitutional hatred of national banks; he feels a fatherly pride in the silver dollar which he worked hard to remonetize; and is enough of an Anti-Monopolist and humanitarian to be dangerous to the railroads and the convict lessees. Dr. Felton is extremely liberal and national in his feelings; possesses much of the

robust boldness of Gen. Mahone, but has no generalship or organizing power. He could give the organized Democracy a hard tussle next year if he had a competent lieutenant to scheme and to work.

The Hon. Emory Speer, the young Congressman from the Ninth, is next to Dr. Felton in his prominence with the Independents. It is believed he would like to put himself in the lead of a new party in Georgia, but he does not know just exactly how to go about it. Speer was beaten in the special election in the Ninth District of March, 1877, but was elected in November, 1878, by 225 majority over the regular nominee, and again in 1880 by over 4,000 majority over the organized candidate. He has been very quiet since the recent letter of Dr. Felton, and although he is a better campaigner and organizer than the latter, lacks some of his confidence at this time. He is a classical college orator, and resembles in his stump speaking, although he surpasses in his skill as a politician, John W. Daniel, of Virginia. There is an element of the Republican Party with which Speer has been long scheming, however, that may turn up as an important factor in the campaign. This element centres in Gen. James Longstreet, who is now United States Marshal of Georgia, and was at one time prominently mentioned for a place in President Arthur's Cabinet. Gen. Longstreet has been a consistent Republican since the war, was a Grant man in 1860, and since then has been working effectively in Washington through Gen. Mahone, whose division was in Longstreet's corps in the late war. Longstreet is trustworthy, popular, and strong, and seems to have arranged very satisfactorily with the President for the encouragement of the Independent movement in Georgia. The better class of Republicans in Georgia—Bigby, now United States District Attorney; Farrow, ex-District Attorney, and others—attended the Markham House conference in Atlanta last month, with a few prominent Democrats, indorsing Dr. Felton's views. There is still a set of Republicans here, like the Jorgensen faction in Virginia, who scout all coalition and are prepared to stand by themselves—for office.

In reviewing the condition of the organized Democracy of the past four years signs of weakness repeatedly came to the surface, and the wonder is that division has not been more disastrous and more permanent. In 1879, when Senator Gordon and Gov. Colquitt had full control and were working party machinery for themselves, disruption was imminent, and Senator Hill, who sided with Dr. Felton and Mr. Stephens against "the Kirkwood clique," as the dominant faction was termed, wrote a strong letter, and prepared himself for a canvass against "personalism in politics." The fraud disclosures of that year opened some scandalous matters in the executive department, and their prompt expurgation by the Young Democracy of the State Legislature alone saved the party. About this time, however, a new factor entered Georgia politics, whose introduction was as stormy as the rising of Aeturus upon the sea, but whose influence has been as potent as the sweep of the moon upon the tides. When Gen. Gordon delivered up his seat in the Senate to Gov. Joseph E. Brown, the Democracy of Georgia was shaken from Nickojack to Tybee Light. The strong belief that there had been a bargain and sale, and the evident opposition to Gov. Brown's reappearance in public affairs divided Georgia Democracy into factions which have never come together. The stormy Gubernatorial convention which broke up in August, 1880, without a nomination, threw Gov. Colquitt as a discordant element upon the party, which his 55,000 majority at the ballot-box did not repair.

And Gov. Brown, who was also elected by a two-thirds vote in the Legislature, is to-day the strength and the weakness of the Democratic party. Gov. Brown is a man of commanding influence in the State. His prosperity and his tranquillity depend upon the retention in power of the Democratic Party, which has especial guardianship over the Western and Atlantic Railroad and the leasing of the convict forces of the penitentiary. Gov. Brown has pinned large pecuniary faith to these industries, and his commercial interests have made him conservative. He is unwilling to encourage any movement which will unsettle his business matters, and the Independent shafts have been aimed at times against both of these institutions, which Democracy has fostered in the State. President Arthur has refused Gov. Brown his favor in court, and Gov. Brown will henceforth take rank as a Bourbon. He is a power in commercial and railroad circles, and is strong in his primitive popularity with the people. He has not held the hearts or admiration of the masses; but their confidence in his shrewdness, sagacity, and common sense has never been shaken. He is rich and keen, and is the strongest man in the Democratic Party to-day. He will hold it together while his interests and its policy are identical, and he commands with the strength of a Chandler, with more policy and finesse, and rules with the durability of Cameron, but with more policy and precision. As parties are at present drawn in Georgia, a vigorous campaign is imminent next Fall, but, as lines and administration policies are now adjusted, Democracy seems likely to hold its own. For Gov. Brown is in the lead, and "while stands the Coliseum, Rome shall stand."