1. In circumstances so critical a cautious quiescence and avoidance of public attention was the only safe course for the “ slave power,” but that course had become im­possible. The numbers interested had become too large to be subject to complete discipline ; all could not be held in cautious reserve ; and, when an advanced proposal came from any quarter of the slave-holding lines, the whole army was shortly forced up to the advanced position. Every movement of the mass was necessarily aggressive ; and aggression meant final collision. If collision came, it must be on some question of the rights of the States ; and on such a question the whole South would move as one man. Everything thus tended to disunion.
2. The Protestant churches of the United States had reflected in their organization the spirit of the political institutions under which they lived. Acting as purely vol­untary associations, they had been organized into govern­ments by delegates, much like the “ conventions ” which had been evolved in the political parties (§ 203). The omnipresent slavery question intruded into these bodies, and split them. The Baptist Church was thus divided into a Northern and a Southern branch in 1845, and the equally powerful Methodist Church met the same fate the following year. Two of the four great Protestant bodies were thus no longer national ; it was only by the most careful manage­ment that the integrity of the Presbyterian Church was maintained until 1861, when it also yielded; and only the Episcopal and Roman Catholic Churches retained their national character. If the process of disruption did not extend to other sects, it was because they were already mainly Northern or mainly Southern.
3. The political parties showed the same tendency. Each began to shrivel up in one section or the other. The notion of “ squatter sovereignty,” attractive at first to the Western democracy, and not repudiated by the South, enabled the Democratic party to pass the crisis of 1850 without losing much of its Northern vote, while Southern Whigs began to drift in, making the party continually more pro-slavery. This could not continue long without begin­ning to decrease its Northern vote, but this effect did not become plainly visible until after 1852. The efforts of the Whig party to ignore the great question alienated its anti­slavery members in the North, while they did not satisfy its Southern members. The Whig losses were not at first heavy, but, as the electoral vote of each State is deter­mined by the barest plurality of the popular vote, they were enough to defeat the party almost everywhere in the presidential election of 1852. The Whigs nominated Scott and the Democrats Pierce ; and Pierce carried all but four of the thirty-one States, and was elected. This revelation of hopeless weakness was the downfall of the Whig party ; it maintained its organization for four years longer, but the life had gone out of it. The future was with the Free Soil party, though it had polled but few votes in 1852.
4. During the administration of Taylor (and Vice- President Fillmore, who succeeded him) Clay, Webster, Calhoun, Polk, and Taylor were removed by death, and there was a steady drift of other political leaders out of public life. New men were pushing in everywhere, and in both sections they showed the prevailing tendency to dis­union. The best of them were unprecedentedly radical. Sumner, Seward, and Chase came into the senate, bringing the first accession of recognized force and ability to the anti-slavery feeling in that body. The new Southern men, such as Davis, and the Democratic recruits from the Southern Whig party, such as Stephens, were ready to take the ground on which Calhoun had always insisted— that Congress was bound not merely to the negative duty of not attacking slavery in the Territories, but to the posi­tive duty of protecting it. This, if it should become the general Southern position, was certain to destroy the notion of squatter sovereignty (§ 226), and thus to split the Demo­cratic party, which was almost the last national ligament that now held the two fragments of the Union together.
5. The social disintegration was as rapid. Northern men travelling in the South were naturally looked upon with increasing suspicion, and were made to feel that they were on a soil alien in sympathies. Some of the worst phases of democracy were called into play in the South ; and, in some sections, law openly yielded supremacy to popular passion in the cases of suspected abolitionists. Southern conventions, on all sorts of subjects, became common ; and in these meetings, permeated by a dawning sense of Southern nationality, hardly any proposition look­ing to Southern independence of the North was met with disfavour. In State elections a distinctly disunion element appeared ; and, though it was defeated, the majority did not deny the right of secession, only its expediency.
6. Calhoun, in his last and greatest speech, called attention to the manner in which one tie after another was snapping. But he ignored the real peril of the situation —its dangerous facts : that the South was steadily grow­ing weaker in comparison with the North, and more unable to secure a wider area for the slave system ; that it was therefore being steadily forced into demanding active Con­gressional protection for slavery in the Territories ; that the North would never submit to this ; and that the South must submit to the will of the majority or bring about a collision by attempting to secede.
7. Anti-slavery feeling in the North was stimulated by the manner in which the Fugitive Slave Law (§ 228) was enforced immediately after 1850. The chase after fugitive slaves was prosecuted in many cases with circum­stances of revolting brutality, and features of the slave system which had been tacitly looked upon as fictitious were brought home to the heart of the free States. The added feeling showed its force when the Kansas-Nebraska Act was passed by Congress (1854). It organized the two new Territories of Kansas and Nebraska. Both of them were for ever free soil by the terms of the Missouri com­promise (§197). But the success of the notion of squatter sovereignty in holding the Democratic party together while destroying the Whig party had intoxicated Douglas and other Northern Democrats ; and they now applied the doc­trine to these Territories. They did not desire “ to vote slavery up or down,” but left the decision to the people of the two Territories.
8. This was the grossest political blunder in American history. The status of slavery had been settled, by the constitution or by the compromises of 1820 and 1850, on every square foot of American soil ; right or wrong, the settlement was made. The Kansas-Nebraska Act took a great mass of territory out of the settlement and flung it into the arena as a prize for which the sections were to struggle ; and the struggle always tended to force, as the only arbiter. The first result of the Act was to throw parties into chaos. An American or “Know-Nothing” party, a secret oath-bound organization, pledged to oppose the influence or power of foreign-born citizens, had been formed to take the place of the defunct Whig party. It had been quite successful in State elections for a time, and was now beginning to have larger aspirations. It, like the Whig party, intended to ignore slavery, but, after a few years of life, the questions complicated with slavery entered its organization and divided it also. Even in 1854 many of its leaders in the North were forced to take position against the Kansas-Nebraska Act, while hosts of others joined in the opposition without any party organization. No American party ever rose so swiftly as