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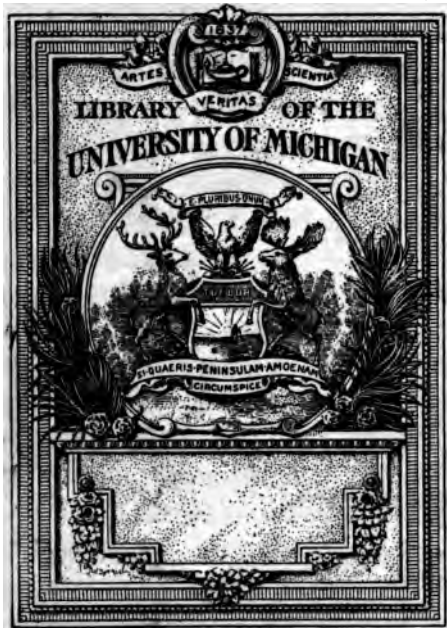
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*Thomas H. Denton*

AMERICAN CRISIS

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JOSSEPH M. HARRIS

Author of "The Four Seasons of the Year"



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AMERICAN CRISIS BIOGRAPHIES

THOMAS H. BENTON

by

JOSEPH M. <sup>*rogers*</sup> ROGERS

Author of "The True Henry Clay," etc.



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## CHRONOLOGY

- 1782—Thomas H. Benton born at Hillsborough, N. C., March 14th.
- 1790—Death of his father.
- 1798—Removes with his mother to the wilderness of Tennessee to become a cotton planter.
- 1811—Elected a member of the Tennessee legislature.
- 1811—Admitted to the bar in Tennessee.
- 1812—Colonel of militia, but no active service.
- 1813—Brawl with Andrew Jackson.
- 1813—Appointed lieutenant-colonel in the regular army. No active service.
- 1815—Removes to St. Louis to continue the practice of the law and edit the *Missouri Enquirer*.
- 1817—Duel with Lucas in which latter was killed.
- 1820—Elected United States Senator after having aided at Washington in securing the Missouri Compromise.
- 1821—Marries Elizabeth McDowell of Virginia, and takes his seat in the Senate.
- 1824—Supports first Clay and then Jackson for the Presidency.
- 1826—Appears as the mutual friend of Clay and Randolph in their bloodless duel.
- 1828—Supports Jackson for the Presidency.
- 1831—Attacks the Whig measure renewing the charter of the National Bank, and declares for gold as a standard of values.



- 1832—Unsuccessfully fights recharter, but prepares the way for Jackson's veto of the bill.
- 1833—Refuses to support the Compromises and conciliate the nullifiers.
- 1834—Secures the passage of the bill establishing the specie standard.
- 1837—Secures passage of resolutions expunging from the records of the Senate the vote of censure passed upon President Jackson.
- 1842—Fights Clay's new bank bill.
- 1843—Narrowly escapes death in the explosion on board the *Princeton*.
- 1845—Opposes the immediate annexation of Texas as tending to reopen the slavery question and is tricked by Tyler.
- 1847—Rejection of bill to make Benton lieutenant-general and the principal commander in the Mexican war.
- 1850—Opposes the great compromises.
- 1850—Defeated for his sixth term in the Senate because of his refusal to bow the knee to the slaveholders in Missouri.
- 1851—Closes his career in the Senate after thirty years of usefulness.
- 1852—Elected to the House of Representatives from a St. Louis district.
- 1854—Defeated for reelection to the House because he would not sacrifice his principles to the Know Nothings. Death of Mrs. Benton.
- 1856—Defeated as an independent candidate for governor of Missouri.
- 1858—Dies at Washington from cancer, April 10.

## INTRODUCTION

THE fame of Thomas H. Benton has suffered almost total eclipse. This is the more to be regretted because he was one of our most substantial statesmen, in merit and achievement outstripping many whose names are more familiar. He sat for thirty consecutive years in the United States Senate, a record never reached before the Civil War, and since then seldom surpassed. Much of this time he was a commanding figure, sometimes dominant and always useful. Over all of his contemporaries he had the advantage of a clearer view of the great problems of the age, because unvexed by ambition : in uprightness and purity of character he was excelled by none. The names of Clay, Webster and Calhoun are household words and their careers are well known. Benton served longer than any one of them, is responsible for more sound legislation than all of them put together, yet only the student of history knows anything about him.

This is due to a number of causes. The Senate in his day was not a forum where enduring fame

was created, unless by that exceptional oratory which he did not possess. He spoke often and on nearly every question of the day, but his words are no longer remembered. The great triumvirate already mentioned owe their reputations less to actual work in the Senate than to outside political activity, each striving long and unsuccessfully for the presidency. More potent is the fact that Benton died just before the Civil War. That great conflict stands as a barrier across the history of the country. It brought more or less enduring fame to some warriors and civilians, but shut out forever many sound statesmen. Benton died fighting for the preservation of the Union: had he lived five years longer he must have become still more conspicuous and have remained to fame as one of the most striking figures in our national life. His political career began with the passage of the Missouri Compromise, and practically closed with its repeal. He ever denied that there was any cause for civil war, and gave up his seat in the Senate, almost as dear to him as life itself, because he would not bow the knee to the slaveholding oligarchy which had finally gained political control of his beloved Missouri. One word would have saved that seat and prolonged his life, but he would not utter it. He

was the first conspicuous martyr to the Union cause.

It is to the extraordinary career of this man that these pages are dedicated. No one can have a correct perspective of the history of the country without some appreciation of the position of this uncompromising advocate of the Union during the thirty years' growth of the slavery issue in politics. Webster and Clay were compromisers seemingly for the sake of preferment. Calhoun was the arch-nul-lifier. Benton was a bulwark of uncompromising unionism from a slave state for almost forty years, and when he died the nation lost one of its truest servants, one of its best men.

It would be idle to impute perfection to Benton. He was exceedingly human and had many defects. He was not a brilliant genius but, what was better, a sound statesman. His abilities were conspicuous and he was offered many positions in the Cabinet, in the diplomatic corps and elsewhere, but he refused them all. The only place he coveted was at the head of the army for which he was thrice scheduled, but fortunately the post was never bestowed upon him. Imperfectly educated in the schools, by ceaseless industry he became a widely read scholar, though somewhat inclined to pedantry.

He had tremendous passions ; in his youth he engaged in brawls and in early manhood killed his antagonist in a duel, an event which marked a change in his life. It has been common to speak of him as a Western statesman, indicating that his sectionalism limited the range of his views and activities. He is so reckoned by writers who speak of Clay and Webster as national statesmen. This is a grave mistake. Much of the legislation originated or endorsed by these two giants was either sectional or transitory. Benton was more truly a national legislator. His nickname, "Old Bullion," stamps him as the father of the sound currency system of this country, while his land policy was more truly national than that of some of his opponents, as will develop later in these pages.

These introductory words are written to stimulate the interest of the untutored reader who may think it hardly possible that Benton is worthy of study. As the series of biographies, of which this is one, is to deal with the men who first and last figured in the great conflict over African slavery we may say here, what the following pages are expected to demonstrate, that Benton was one of the most important factors in the contest. Those who give Clay unstinted praise for his love of the Union—so

great that his dead bones kept Kentucky from secession,—seem to forget that in Missouri Benton, though dead, also kept his state in the Union at a most perilous time. The loss of Missouri in 1861 would have been an almost fatal blow to the Union. That it was finally preserved was due in no small measure to the bitter war that Benton waged so long against disunionists, and though his personal fortunes and his life were swept away in the contest before the clash of arms, his spirit survived to conquer.

Lastly it should not be forgotten at a time when the nation has so recently celebrated the centennial of the Louisiana Purchase, that Benton was the first as he was the greatest of the statesmen that have arisen west of the Mississippi, and that the development of the Purchase, the acquisition of the Pacific slope and the construction of the first transcontinental railway are due more to his influence than to that of any other single man.



# THOMAS H. BENTON

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## CHAPTER I

### YOUTH AND EDUCATION

EVEN if interesting it would be foreign to the purpose of this work to dwell long on the youth of Thomas H. Benton. It was not different from that of thousands of other men in an age which was crude as to civilization, but potent in building up masterful character. Of Benton's ancestry, on his father's side, little is known. We shall see later how under unusual circumstances John Randolph furnished him with a crest and putative family tree establishing his connection with the landed gentry of England. But Benton cared for none of these things. He went back no farther than his grandfather, who settled in North Carolina.

His father, Jesse Benton, a loyalist in the Revolution, secretary to Governor Tryon, was a prominent lawyer in Hillsborough, Orange County, North



Carolina, where Thomas was born March 14, 1782, the eldest of a family of eight children. Jesse Benton who was a man of unusual scholarship, well-read in five languages, died when Thomas was only eight years old. He left some property in what is now North Carolina, but his chief asset was a large tract in Tennessee (then a part of North Carolina), whither the family eight years later removed.

To his mother Benton always gave the credit of his success in life, and in so far as it could be attributed to any one other than himself, the appreciation was just. She was born Ann Gooch, of a good Virginia family and was a remarkable woman. She was a Roman mother in the best sense of the term, looking upon the education of her children as the prime duty of her life and nobly carrying out her plans. Perceiving the natural abilities of Thomas, she early destined him for a public career and her greatest joy in later years was to see him become one of the leading statesmen of the country. She herself long remained a beautiful woman and Benton was very proud of her. No sacrifice for her comfort was too great, and in her great age she truly said that no mother ever had a more devoted son.

Thomas, who at eight was learning Greek, was

early sent to a grammar school and for a time to the University of North Carolina, a feeble institution according to modern standards; but before he had completed the course the family removed to the wilderness of Tennessee where his mother believed the children would have greater opportunities in life.

The "Widow Benton's Settlement" consisted of 3,000 acres, and a claim on some 40,000 acres in the wilderness twenty-five miles south of Nashville on the very frontier of the Indian country and along the great war trail which the aborigines followed in war paint when attacking the whites or other native tribes. In those days pioneering involved relatively less courage and self-sacrifice than now, but at best the task was a severe one from which Mrs. Benton never flinched. Her settlement was made on a considerable scale. Slaves cleared the forests, tilled the soil, erected the household dwellings, a log schoolhouse and a rude church which itinerant Methodist clergymen used occasionally. Mrs. Benton abandoned the Episcopal for the Methodist Church, which almost alone kept the lamp of religion burning on the frontier. Thomas continued his education as best he could, reading widely, studying law and teaching.

Responsibilities were early laid on his shoulders. Soon after his father died, his mother gave him one of the babies and told him he must be a father to it and serve as the head of the family. Right loyally did he carry out the injunction. He was devoted to his sisters and their refining influence was noted all through his life. In his old age his grandchildren one evening were complaining that they could not sing well as the guitar was out of tune. The septuagenarian took the instrument, tuned it properly and handing it back, said, "I always used to play and sing with my sisters and I have never forgotten how." He was passionately fond of music and missed no opportunity to hear the best singers until his wife's illness led him to give up all public amusements.

Five of the eight Benton children died of consumption. Thomas was supposed to be certain of the same fate, but at the outbreak of the War of 1812 he became imbued with the martial spirit and at once entered upon a regimen which resulted in complete cure and which is so close to that recommended by physicians to-day as to be worth repeating: "Open air night and day. Abundant perspiration from steady exercise. Bathing and rubbing always, if possible, in sunshine. Simple

food regularly taken and to forget yourself in some pursuit." It is said that he induced many to follow this regimen, and like himself they were cured of the disease.

Cotton planting was one of the chief industries of Tennessee. At the start most of the Benton plantation was devoted to this produce, as was customary at that time. One year an early frost ruined the crop. Never thereafter would Benton risk all his fields in one staple, and labored most unsuccessfully to get his neighbors to adopt rotation.

In 1807 he wrote to a friend saying: "I am become a right man of business, and want advancement wherever it can be found." Just why he lacked advancement in Tennessee is not easily understood. He was in prosperous circumstances, but it is probable that he preferred law to planting, and thought Tennessee a poor field for that profession. The country was crude and litigation not extensive, while there were already at Nashville several prominent lawyers.

The first autobiographic glimpse we get of him is in his description of the life and services of Jackson.<sup>1</sup> He tells us he was seventeen when he first

<sup>1</sup>Thomas H. Benton, "Thirty Years' View of the United States Senate," Vol. I.

saw sitting on the bench the man with whose fortunes in later years his own were to be closely linked. He did not make Jackson's acquaintance until the latter had left the bench and Benton was practicing at the bar to which he was admitted in 1811. He was junior counsel in a case involving a friend of Jackson's, and freeing his man was warmly complimented by the former judge, who at this time lived at the "Hermitage" and supposed himself retired from public life. At the outbreak of the War of 1812 Jackson was elected major-general of the militia by one majority. On what small things do great events sometimes depend. Had not that one vote been available Jackson might have died a respected planter, known as a man who had once been a judge and an Indian fighter and for nothing else except a violent temper. His ambition for appointment to a post in the regular army met an unexpected obstacle when Harrison and Winchester were selected from the West, and he was passed over by the administration. It was young Benton who suggested to Jackson that the thing to do was to raise a brigade and practically force the nation to accept it.

Benton had the pen of a ready writer and was vain in youth and even afterward of his composi-

tions. It occurred to him that it would be a good idea for Jackson to issue to the troops an address, which would attract the attention of the national authorities. He wrote such an address and took it to Jackson to read and sign, if he chose. He found the doughty general by the kitchen fire with his adopted son, less than two years old, and a lamb between his knees. Jackson explained to his visitor that the little boy had cried because the lamb was out in the wet, so he had brought it in and they were having a sort of "family party." This was a case of the lamb and the lion lying down together, and it throws a side-light on the character of Jackson which is interesting. The address was signed, Jackson eventually got his place in the service and Benton was for a time his aide-de-camp.

Acting upon his own advice Benton also raised a regiment and among his corporals was a long, lank young man named Sam Houston of whom the country was to hear much and who was the colleague and closest friend of Benton in his last years. It was never called into active service, much to his regret, for he was anxious for military adventure, and to the end of his life thought he would have made a good soldier, outranking both Scott and Taylor.

Later on in the War of 1812 he was appointed a lieutenant-colonel in the regular army and started for Canada, but peace came too soon for him even to see a battle.

It was during this period (September 4, 1813) that he came into collision with General Jackson in a way that interrupted their friendly relations for many years. It is commonly said that Benton fought a duel with Jackson, but, more properly speaking, the affair was a barroom brawl. Benton's brother Jesse had been involved with William (afterward General) Carroll in an "affair of honor" in which Jackson had seconded the latter. In the angry dispute which followed, Thomas Benton, though then serving on Jackson's staff, espoused his brother's cause and the result was a fracas involving the four above mentioned persons and some others. Jackson struck Jesse Benton with his horsewhip and was promptly shot in the shoulder. In the general *mêlée* which followed, knives, pistols and clubs were used, Jesse Benton receiving serious wounds, while Thomas was knocked down-stairs. It was long before the animosities thus aroused were assuaged.

After the War Benton resolved to remove to St. Louis, which was then a small village, but pros-

pects seemed brighter there than in Tennessee. He had already served a term in the legislature of the latter state, where two conspicuous pieces of legislation were placed to his credit.<sup>1</sup> He reformed the antiquated judiciary laws, and secured the right of trial by jury to slaves. The latter was his first public act in relation to an institution with which he was to be prominently identified for the next fifty years.

In 1815 he arrived in St. Louis, opened a law office and began the publication of the *Missouri Enquirer*, which became a bold and vigorous newspaper. Now thirty-three years old, he was courageous, self-reliant, and well equipped for the ordinary practice of the law. As land titles were a conspicuous subject of litigation, owing to the vague and overlapping grants under Spanish and French rule, he began the study of the subject with that tireless industry and talent in grasping first principles which characterized his whole life. He became an accomplished Spanish scholar, acquiring knowledge which was of great value to him later when we had our troubles with Mexico; delved into dusty manuscripts; and in a few years became the leading land lawyer of the state, winning, for those

<sup>1</sup> Benton's "View."



days, enormous fees which were judiciously invested, so that after he entered public life and gave up absolutely his law practice, these savings were practically all he had aside from his meagre salary.

In youth he was grave in demeanor, though quick to perceive and resent an affront. Owing to his mother's request he never used liquor or tobacco and did not gamble. This was astonishing in an age and in a section where these practices were scarcely looked upon as vices. His reputation for morals and good breeding was blemished, however, by his pugnacious disposition. An aged Georgian some years ago stated that in his youth in Tennessee he frequently saw Jackson and Benton with cocks under their arms engaged in a favorite pastime of that region.<sup>1</sup> As Benton denies, with some warmth, that Jackson ever kept game-cocks, it would seem as if he wished to deny the imputation on his own account. But in one respect he was notable. Dueling was much in vogue in those days, though declining in the East since the death of Alexander Hamilton. Before he was elected to the Senate, Benton never failed to call out his man on occasion or respond to a call from another. The climax was reached in 1817, when articles in his newspaper and

<sup>1</sup> Col. A. K. McClure, "Recollections of Fifty Years."

harangues at the bar, couched in that vigorous, intemperate language for which he later became famous, brought on a duel with a young United States District Attorney named Charles Lucas.

According to the latter, the affair started in 1816, in a case before a jury in which he and Benton were on opposite sides. The lie was passed and Benton sent a challenge, but Lucas declined on the ground that he had been sustained by the verdict of the jury in the case, and he did not consider the controversy as coming within the code. Thereupon Benton is accused of using very bad language about Lucas to his face and behind his back, so the young man finally challenged. They fought on Bloody Island, in the Mississippi, at ten paces, and both were wounded, Lucas severely, Benton very slightly. Neither party was satisfied, and Benton challenged to another meeting. This was arranged to take place at ten feet. The men fired simultaneously and Lucas fell. Benton then expressed regret and asked forgiveness, to which Lucas at first replied, "O Benton, you have persecuted me and murdered me. I do not and cannot forgive you." Later, however, when nearly gone, Lucas said, "I can forgive you, I do forgive you," and died. This was on September 27, 1817, the blackest day

in Benton's life. He destroyed all the papers connected with the duel, which is unfortunate, as those of his opponent have been preserved. Although we may well suppose that he had some provocation, his propensity for fighting was such as to make the blame rest largely on his shoulders, especially as he was ten years the senior of Lucas. The fatal outcome of the affair had such an effect upon him, however, that he never again went to the "field of honor."

It can be said that Benton was loose and violent in the expression of his views, and that whatever his virtues, consideration for others never belonged in his repertory. A contemporary and friend says that as editor of the Missouri *Enquirer*, Benton was "careless in the use of strong language, and was frequently led into fierce altercations and disputes" because he thought so strongly and wrote so unqualifiedly. These traits were characteristic of him during most of his life. He was incautious and violent, but never affected by ignoble motives. Though he did not fight again, he remained a believer in the code and was esteemed the highest authority on those complicated points of honor which it involved. Often in later life he was called upon to draw some fine distinction or to give some opin-

ion, and though he always counseled peace, he cannot be said to have done very much to overthrow the institution by his example, however much he regretted and inveighed against the evil.

Hereafter Benton's career was to be national. His equipment was naturally good, and by incessant study of literature, men and events, he perfected it as much as circumstances would allow. He had followed the development of American civilization from the "Old North State" through Tennessee, and now was to become a constructive statesman, the greatest who has hailed from beyond the borders of the original territory of the United States.

## CHAPTER II

### EARLY POLITICAL INTERESTS IN MISSOURI

THE unusual condition whereby Missouri was admitted to the Union, familiarly known as the Missouri Compromise, was the first act of Congress to restrict the territorial extension of African slavery after the re-enactment of the Ordinance of 1787, which forever prohibited slavery in the Northwest Territory. It long remained a fruitful source of political and moral contention and its repeal, followed by a declaration of the Supreme Court in the Dred Scott case in 1857, that it was from the beginning unconstitutional, was an active agent in bringing on the Civil War.

The history of Missouri does not belong to this work, but a glance at it is necessary to understand Thomas H. Benton. The country was originally explored by French missionaries, and was long in control of Spain or France, during which time almost the sole occupation of the settlers was trading in furs with the Indians. After the purchase of Louisiana, St. Louis, at the mouth of the Missouri,

became the business centre for the upper portion of the territory and in the divisions which followed, the northern section was gradually advanced through the three grades of territorial rank to the highest. The population increased rapidly after the Lewis and Clark expedition, sent out by President Jefferson in 1803 to secure information regarding our new dominions. These explorers were absent for two years on a journey that took them to the head waters of the Missouri and to the far northwest "where rolls the Oregon." The fur trade grew and after there were 20,000 inhabitants, application was made (in 1818) for the admission of Missouri to the Union, the boundaries being those of the present state minus the extreme northwestern portion called the Platte Tract which was added later. The early administration of the territory had been not altogether happy and the confusion over land titles was great, until Congress tardily passed a law to confirm the French and Spanish grants. This action was taken largely through the influence of Benton after he reached the Senate.

There was delay over the admission of the state because of the slavery question. In the North the restriction of the evil was becoming both a moral

and a political issue. How many statesmen were moved by each consideration it is hard to determine, though it cannot be denied that some of the most violent restrictionists said openly that it was principally a matter of politics. New England had fought desperately against the purchase of Louisiana because it seemed to involve a redistribution of political power. There was undoubtedly some growing moral opinion on the extension of slavery, and as the Ohio line was fixed as its upper boundary by the Ordinance of 1787 it was not unnatural that Northern people should desire to see that line extended. The South's objection was that it got so small a share of the new territory. When the first Missouri bill appeared in Congress, Tallmadge, of New York, offered in the House an amendment as a condition precedent to admission specifying "that the further introduction of slavery or involuntary servitude shall be prohibited, except for crime, etc., and that all [negro] children born within the state after the admission thereof, shall be free at the age of twenty-five years." This amendment passed the House and was rejected by the Senate, Congress adjourning without final action. The subject became a dominating one in politics. Alabama was admitted with slavery, Arkansas was soon orga-

nized as a territory with slavery, but the great struggle centred in Missouri.

When Congress met in December, 1820, the House still favored restriction but the Senate was against it. Some of the ablest statesmen of the old Federalist school thought the proposed restriction wrong, particularly as slavery already existed in Missouri, and was rapidly growing stronger: the limitation therefore seemed an unnecessary and onerous hardship. The greater portion of the Missouri whites came from Kentucky, Tennessee and other slave states. In 1820 there were 66,000 people in the state of whom 10,000 were slaves. The local sentiment of Missouri which in earlier times had been somewhat favorable to restriction changed under Benton's leadership and the constitutional convention was, with a single dissenting vote, unanimous for unrestricted slavery and went farther, aiming to prevent the residence of free negroes in the state. Congress was now greatly embarrassed. At this time there was an exact numerical balance between the free and the slave states. To admit Maine (formerly a part of Massachusetts) as a free state and virtually compel Missouri to abandon slavery meant a vital disturbance of that perfect balance which Southern statesmen were



coming to think more and more essential to the preservation of the Union. By this time the mask was thrown off, and the restrictionists openly avowed that their object was political power, though there were many earnest anti-slavery people both in and out of Congress. A new bill to admit Missouri was rejected by the House, largely on the alleged ground that the provision as to free negroes was unconstitutional, and partially because many members objected to that provision which forbade the legislature to interfere at any time in the matter of slavery. This last provision was the work of Benton who was equally opposed to slavery agitation and slavery extension, as he repeated nearly every day of his life until the end. As slavery existed in Missouri he did not at that time care to interfere with it, though later he was the leader in a movement for gradual emancipation.

The Senate favored admission and the House was still against it, when Henry Clay came to the front with his first compromise. It was effected solely through his agency, though curiously enough he always denied being its author. He offered a resolution in the House for the appointment of a select committee to confer with a similar one from the Senate to devise a plan to meet the existing situ-

ation. These committees framed a compromise by which Missouri was admitted with slavery on condition that the restriction as to free negroes should be inoperative (a provision which was in any event clearly unconstitutional); but the rule was made absolute that thereafter no state created out of the Louisiana Purchase north of thirty-six degrees and thirty minutes, the southern boundary of Missouri, should be admitted with slavery. As a corollary, Maine was admitted as a free state, indeed could have been admitted on no other terms, as Massachusetts would have allowed her to depart only to preserve the balance which was a part of the political program. Slavery agitation in politics was then hushed for a decade. It can be said that the Missouri Compromise, which was to a great extent the work of Benton, came to be looked upon by the people with the same sacredness as the Constitution itself. Every attack upon it met with resistance from the South as well as from the North. In fact it was a Southern measure and it boded ill for the South that it was later willing and anxious to repudiate it.

Thus Missouri entered the Union under very unusual circumstances. The state was young, resourceful and growing rapidly. With the Missis-

Mississippi marking one border and the Missouri flowing across it, communication by natural means was more ample than in any other state. Agriculture was the chief industry of course, but fur dealing was still profitable. The salt springs were a source of wealth, the lead mines were being worked largely, and with the remarkable increase in the number of steamboats, commerce was growing rapidly. The outlook for the future was therefore excellent. Few realize what an enormous state in wealth and population Missouri is to-day. St. Louis and Kansas City are well-known marts, but with the people as a whole there is ignorance of the present power and riches of the state which the Louisiana Purchase Exposition has only partially removed. In 1900 its rank was fifth in population, but the density was only about one-half that of Illinois and one-third that of New York. Its undeveloped area largely exceeds that of any of the states which outrank it in population, and its total area is greater than that of any one of them.

When Benton arrived in St. Louis he perceived the potentialities of Missouri and saw the lines along which its development must proceed. He did not possess the "glorious gift of imagination" but he had intelligence and was confident of the

future. He threw himself into the fight for what seemed to him the correct policy on slavery with such vigor that he became in a few years the dominating power, and was soon chosen one of the state's first senators, receiving four re-elections.

The first senatorial contest came at the time of the application of the state for admission into the Union in 1818, and Benton, who was a newcomer, was not one of those selected. At the next election, he was nominated for the office by State Senator Boone, who was a son of the renowned Daniel Boone, the pathfinder of Kentucky. Daniel had been a friend of Benton's father and the act of the younger Boone in forwarding his interests Benton never forgot.

It was not until the last moment, however, that Benton expected to be the choice of the legislature. He had been in the state for so short a time that his candidacy was not taken very seriously by himself or any one else. Indeed, his election was in a way accidental. The legislature met in a tavern in St. Louis in 1820 and David Barton, the most popular man in the state, was elected on the first ballot almost without opposition. For the second senatorship there were several candidates, the most prominent being Judge Lucas, whose son had been killed

by Benton in the duel already described. After many ballotings which led to no result and in which were apparent no "corrupt intrigues, manipulations and slush money" according to an eyewitness, Senator Barton was consulted as to his choice of a colleague. He picked out Benton who at once gained a commanding lead, but still for a long time there was no election. One friend of Benton was sick, but even if he were present another vote was needed. The last man to be whipped in was Marie Philip Le Duc, who had said he would lose his right arm rather than vote for Benton. The story, as told in Switzler's "History of Missouri,"<sup>1</sup> is that he was interested for himself and others in the old French and Spanish land grants. It was shown to him that while Lucas by his decisions had been opposed to those claims, Benton as the most successful land attorney in the territory had defended them; a vote for Benton was a vote for the grants. This decided him and he changed his mind and kept his arm. Before the last ballot was cast four stalwart negroes bore the sick member already mentioned on a stretcher to the hall, where he voted for Benton and was carried back to die. This was Benton's only serious con-

<sup>1</sup> *q. v.* with complete account of duel and election.

test until 1850 when he lost his seat. For the next four terms Missouri re-elected him without more than a formal vote.

Before leaving for the Senate he gave up all his many and valuable clients involved in land grants, for he was determined to secure legislation on the subject. As he favored the validation of the claims he considered it improper to have monetary interest in the matter, nor would he recommend to his clients any lawyer to take his place in looking after their affairs. In this as in every matter affecting his financial interests he was throughout his life the soul of honor. He might have become very wealthy without the slightest infraction of modern moral and financial standards, as his information was not only always early but his conviction about the future of the country was deeper than that of any of his contemporaries. Lest it should be said that he was affected in any way by personal interest he avoided even the appearance of evil.<sup>1</sup>

It may seem extraordinary that a stranger should have made such rapid progress as had Benton in five years. Under any circumstances he must have forged rapidly to the front but he arrived in Mis-

<sup>1</sup> Roosevelt, "Life of Thomas H. Benton."

souri at what is now termed the "psychological moment." The territory was yearning for statehood, the population was miscellaneous in every respect and was rapidly growing and needing leadership. Through his newspaper, on the stump and at the bar Benton made himself felt from the start. He was courageous, self-reliant and energetic. He had a sort of audacious wit and a not over-refined satire which delighted the people of his section. He led the fight for unrestricted slavery at a time when the opposition seemed likely to win. His personality soon began to dominate the politics of the whole territory and his election as a senator was a just reward for his many services.

## CHAPTER III

### ENTRY INTO THE SENATE

WHEN in 1821 Benton took his seat in the Senate of the United States, he was thirty-nine years of age and had passed almost exactly one-half the years allotted him. Of those remaining, thirty years were to be spent in the Senate, two in the House, a few in writing and his last days in an effort to stem the tide of disunion.

Soon after his election he married Elizabeth McDowell, who was of a distinguished Virginia family. Four daughters and two sons were born of this union.

Upon his entry into the Senate he assumed the manners of the older time. In speech, except under excitement, he was dignified; in deportment, somewhat stilted; and it must be confessed there was an air of egotism about him that was not entirely pleasing. He had been as carefully trained as circumstances allowed, and his sudden rise to fame may have given him an unduly exalted idea of his own importance. His equipment may seem defective, viewed by modern standards, but he was



undoubtedly above the intellectual stature of most statesmen from the West, and he grew steadily. His industry was untiring. He devoted the hours which others spent in carousing, to the study of public matters until he became a mine of information and his practical wisdom was almost proverbial. He represented his constituents more satisfactorily than a man apparently better equipped. He was a sound lawyer, and although he assumed an aristocratic and, after a time, a patronizing air, he was on the whole a simple-hearted man, and in after years many coming young statesmen owed a great deal to his kindness.

Much of the time for a year before he was permitted to take his seat, he had been at the national capital, and was thus made familiar with the peculiar conditions which then existed in national politics, at this time entering upon a new era. Monroe, who was just beginning his second term, was the last of the Revolutionary "Fathers" to be President, the last with ambitions in that direction. The coming group of statesmen were Americans in the sense that their education had been gained under the national flag, though some years were to elapse before one born an American citizen should be chosen chief magistrate.

Monroe entered on his second term considerably embarrassed. Three members of his cabinet were candidates for the succession ; John Quincy Adams, John C. Calhoun, and William H. Crawford. He resolved to be absolutely neutral and carried out this policy to an extraordinary degree,—in fact greatly overdoing the matter since his own administration was interfered with by the rivalries in his official family. He would have done better to dismiss them all and let them settle their differences beyond the limits of the public service.

John Quincy Adams was the natural successor according to the ethics of the time, which made the Secretary of State a president in waiting. Every president after Washington had been at the head of the department of foreign affairs with the exception of the elder Adams. The younger Adams was the best equipped man of the three by reason of his experience and was ambitious for promotion. From the age of fourteen he had been more or less active in the public service, was a ripe scholar and a sound statesman. Much of the credit of Monroe's administration was due to his successful management of foreign affairs at a time when they were peculiarly difficult.

Calhoun, as Secretary of War, was still young

and a national figure. It is a strange fact that he and Adams were close friends, and that the Massachusetts statesman, who was far from being sympathetic as a rule, was warmly drawn to his young colleague from South Carolina, having had at one time a thought of asking him to run with him as vice-president until it was known that he was ambitious for higher honors.

William H. Crawford, of Georgia, was the politician *par excellence* of the times, the first to work himself into great prominence as a "machine" politician, in the present meaning of the term. He had a giant frame, a well-trained intellect and personal magnetism of an extraordinary kind. He drew men to him, not so much by his principles or his views on public questions, as by his personal characteristics and promises of support. So great had been his influence that it was even proposed that he be a candidate for president in 1820 against Monroe, but this he refused to do on the ground that Monroe was entitled to a second term and probably also because he knew that he could not have won had he entered the race. He was less of a statesman than either Adams or Calhoun, but he had had broad experience in political affairs, and was taking advantage of that growth

of democracy which, beginning under Jefferson, was now rapidly extending.

Somewhat to anticipate the course of events, it may be said here, and in this connection, that two other candidates soon appeared in the field, Henry Clay and Andrew Jackson.

Henry Clay was a man of unbridled ambition, who had been awaiting his chance, and it now seemed the time for him to enter the lists. He had quarreled with Adams at Ghent<sup>1</sup> and though cognizant of his abilities held him personally, by reason of his Puritanism, in rather low esteem. Clay was soon launched as a candidate, but he had a comparatively small following, in spite of his career in the Senate and the House, of which he had been the Speaker during nearly the entire period of his membership. He looked to getting the support of those who should prove unavailable, rather than to building up an active constituency of his own. He naturally counted on a good deal of favor in the West, but he was soon eclipsed by the rising star of Jackson.

Andrew Jackson is one of the most peculiar men in all our history. Defectively educated, reared in a rude school, he had little experience in public

<sup>1</sup> Adams' Diary.

affairs of the nation except as a soldier, in which capacity he developed a positive genius for success with incidental talent for getting into trouble with the civil authorities. He was, however, the exponent and the embodiment of the rising tide of American democracy as opposed to the culture, education and experience of the older communities.

It is difficult for us in these days to estimate the excitement and disgust caused among statesmen of the old school by the announcement that he had determined to enter the contest. Up to this time service in civil affairs was considered a *sine qua non* for preferment. It is true that Washington's military services were his chief claim to the gratitude of the country, but he was in a class by himself. All others had risen gradually and had earned their promotion.

The singular fact about these five candidates was that they were all Republicans, alleged followers of Jefferson. Adams had been a Federalist and was almost ostracized in New England for adhering to the new order of things. The rest were and had always been Democrats, as we now understand the term, though it did not come into general use until after the election of Jackson. None of them could raise any especial banner of principles ; none had a

distinct political program to announce as opposed to the others, though Clay and Adams were the most liberal in their views of the Constitution. In time Calhoun withdrew to accept second honors, but the other four fought the contest to its end, and the rivalries thus engendered occupied most of the political activities of Monroe's second term, all legislation being variously viewed as it affected the candidacy of one or all of the aspirants.

Benton's entrance into public life was coincident with this centrifugal condition of politics, and it inhered to his advantage that he hitched his wagon to the Jackson star very early in his career. We have seen that he had been embroiled with this soldier in youth, but the very bitterness of their early antagonism seems to have cemented more firmly their later friendship, which is one of the most important in all our history, since it resulted in enterprises of great pith and moment.

The issues which were before the country at the time Benton took his seat in the winter of 1821 were many. The country had passed through a severe financial crisis; the government could not raise sufficient ordinary revenue for its expenses; banks generally, outside of New England, had suspended specie payments; the public lands were

sold on unfavorable terms stimulating unfortunate speculation and discriminating against the actual settler ; the country was aroused over the Texas question, Monroe, on the advice of the southern as well as the northern members of his cabinet, having failed to embrace the opportunity to annex that territory ; internal improvements caused vexation of spirit ; the slavery extension question was not yet entirely forgotten ; while the South American revolutions were making it apparent that we must soon take an important stand in that part of the world. These things were giving Monroe and the people a good deal of food for thought while the politicians were studying them for their own purposes.

It is to Benton's credit that from the very start he made a stand in favor of a sound currency, —for coin rather than notes of any kind. Before he took his seat, Congress had been obliged to cut down expenses wherever possible, especially in reference to the army, navy and fortifications, and even then it was compelled to borrow a large sum of money to carry on the government. The land bill of which Benton was one of the chief instigators, changed our whole policy on that subject.

Before this time land had generally been sold in large tracts and on credit. Too confident invest-

ors would buy large lots, make small initial payments and then fail later ; so that it was often necessary to give extensions or to withdraw patents, in which case litigation resulted and the titles were clouded. Benton's policy was to sell the land for cash at a maximum of \$1.25 an acre ; to give preference to the actual settler ; and to let those who had made small payments on large lots concentrate them on smaller sections and secure a complete title. This policy he had preached in his newspaper, on the stump and in the lobby, while he was waiting to get his seat in the Senate. Though the measure seems to have been devised originally by Crawford, and was introduced before Benton became a member, he was active in aiding its passage and after getting his seat his energy never abated until he secured the pre-emptive right of the settler to his lands, a measure that has perhaps been of more value to this country than any other dealing with public property. It made settlement easy and the forests soon rang with the axes of the sturdy pioneers who pushed westward to get the new lands, picking out the rich prairie fields where a living came from a mere tickling of the surface of the soil.

One result of this liberal policy of the govern-



ment was that in a short time sufficient revenue was obtained to pay off the entire debt and leave a large surplus in the Treasury. The country gradually recovered from its financial depression and the service of the United States Bank in assisting in this work was one of the questions soon to be injected into national politics, and a subject on which Benton had most positive convictions.

As an expansionist, Benton was utterly unfettered except by practical conditions. He lamented the loss of Texas, and was ever foremost in explaining to the "effete East" that the possibilities of the West were unlimited. Though he represented Missouri directly his eyes were constantly turned toward the West, and especially the Northwest.

He advocated the construction of a military road to New Mexico which was finally accomplished, and was instant in season and out of season in urging the government to secure a firm hold on the Oregon country.<sup>1</sup> Astor had founded a trading post there and the Lewis and Clark Expedition had given the United States a title to the country that only needed to be strongly pressed against the shadowy claims of Great Britain.

This territory, however, was of about as little

<sup>1</sup> Benton's "Thirty Years' View."

interest to the nation at large as is Greenland at the present day, it being the general opinion that it involved too much money to hold what no one would ever desire except as a hunting-ground for fur-bearing animals. Such seeming short-sightedness is not to be wondered at so much when we consider that in Benton's first term there were not over one hundred thousand white persons west of the Mississippi. Benton, however, did not hold any such view. He seems to have had the eagle eye of prophecy. What he wrote in 1822 now reads almost like recorded history. He foresaw the expansion of the country, though he could not anticipate its swiftness or the exact causes which were to bring it about. He therefore put all his immense energies into the task of saving Oregon and finally succeeded. In one of his first speeches he urged that the Pacific coast of this country was soon to become neighbor to Asia and advised sending ministers to the Emperors of China and Japan, a proposal that was then considered almost as humorous as it would be now to advocate sending one to Mars.<sup>1</sup> He fairly made the hair rise on some of the older senators' heads by predicting that in a century there would be as many persons living west of the Rocky Mountains

<sup>1</sup> Benton's "View," Vol. I.

as then inhabited the whole United States. That prophecy has not yet come true but it is measurably near realization and it may be that persons now living who knew Benton will see the day.

He did not think it possible at that time, however, to extend the boundaries of the country directly to the Pacific. As easy communication with the Oregon country could not be maintained, since the Rocky Mountains were our natural barrier, his idea was to hold it, believing that in time there would be erected an independent state which would become an ally of this republic and perhaps eventually join the Union. Before long, when the "iron horse" had greatly changed social conditions, he foresaw that the Rocky Mountains need not be the natural obstacle he had earlier assumed they would be, and to no one is the construction of the first transcontinental railway due so much as to him.

While the measures which have been mentioned were national in scope and redounded to the benefit of the whole country, Benton, in urging their adoption, was not without regard for the interests of Missouri. That state was then the outpost of the frontier. Her territory extended farther

west than that of any other state, and as the country expanded she was the first to come into touch with the new territories, whereby she soon enjoyed a vast increase in her trade.

One of the crying abuses of the West was the monopoly of salt. There were saline springs in Missouri withheld from sale by the government and leased to politicians and their favorites on terms which created an odious monopoly. It may seem a small thing in this day, but salt was a burning question in politics for one hundred years. It entered into the very first tariff bill and was fiercely fought over in the McKinley Bill a century later; since which time it seems to have lost much of its importance, owing to changes in commercial and other conditions. In the early part of the nineteenth century it was a very expensive article of every-day life. Transportation was costly. In a rude country where every farm was a sort of microcosm, salt was necessary to preserve the meat put down for winter use, and was one of the very few things the settler could not do without. In making salt more plentiful and cheaper, by securing the adoption of the rule that the springs should be sold to the highest bidder without corrupt partiality, Benton not only performed an act of states-

manship but endeared himself to his constituents in a way that his generation never forgot.

Although a free-trader, especially in the later years of his life, he was sagacious enough in the perfection of tariff bills always to work for the interests of his own constituents, as in demanding a duty upon lead.

His ideas were also turned toward the development of river navigation in Missouri, and he was willing to vote money to clear the snags and sand-bars from the Mississippi, which he was pleased to regard as a national highway, when he was opposed to digging a canal or building a turnpike.

It is easy to say that this was because Missouri was interested much in the one and very little in the other, and undoubtedly there is a good deal of truth in the statement. We all of us very clearly see things we desire to see, and it was no strain on Benton's reasoning powers to argue that the natural highways of commerce which largely appertained to the whole nation were in a different category from roads running through individual states. Indeed when he came to advocate the construction of the great road to New Mexico he replied to all charges of inconsistency by saying that the proposed improvement went entirely

through federal territory and did not touch any state. This may now seem to us a narrow reasoning but it sufficed at a time when men were delighted to make a fetich of the Constitution and believed or acted as if they thought that the country were made for that instrument and not the reverse.

Considering the times in which he lived, Benton was a man of great liberality of view. He was eminently practical and ever tried to impress upon his fellows that the imaginations of their hearts were too continually evil, and that many of the woes they anticipated could come only because they were constantly expected. As a rule he labored in vain. The man who had decided that the Constitution meant such and such a thing was not to be turned from his course, even if the Republic fell, especially when he could see that his interests lay on the side of his interpretation. And it often came to pass that his interests unconsciously guided his direction of thought. When churchmen in New England and elsewhere fell into the most violeht controversies over the exact meaning of some text of Scripture, dividing families, separating old friends, and arousing bitternesses of the most intense sort, it is not to be wondered at that the politicians de-

voted days and nights to a study of the Constitution either to discover what it actually meant, or to prove that it meant the specific thing they desired it to mean.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDING HIS PLACE

WHEN in the last Monroe administration Benton was obliged to take sides on the great question of the succession, he decided first in favor of Clay. He was a relative of Mrs. Clay and he had a great admiration for the Kentucky statesman who was moreover the candidate *par excellence* of the West at the outset. No sooner was Jackson in the field than Benton redoubled his efforts, since he had not yet become reconciled to that early antagonist who still carried in his arm the bullet of his brother, Jesse Benton. As fate would have it, Tennessee had a vacancy in the Senate, and Andrew Jackson was chosen to fill it. When he arrived to take his seat in the body of which twenty odd years previously he had been a member for a short time, the only vacant chair was beside Benton. This was at first embarrassing to both and except for the most formal recognition they remained unconscious of each other's presence until they were chosen to serve on the same committee. Then



Jackson opened the way to more informal intercourse which Benton at first stiffly refused. But both were men of innate courtesy, and it was not long until they had exchanged cards and established social relations, at length becoming the warmest friends in politics which this country has ever known.<sup>1</sup>

This condition of affairs did not at the time affect the position of Benton as to the presidency. He was in favor of Clay so long as the latter had a chance to win. It soon appeared, owing to the peculiar political treacheries of the time, that Clay was fourth on the list (though he would have been third had promises been kept), and was therefore constitutionally eliminated from the contest.

Benton then turned his attention to Crawford, but that statesman had been attacked by paralysis and it was evident that he could not win in any event. As between Adams and Jackson, he preferred the latter both because he was a western man and because the sentiment of Missouri was in his favor. The contest was settled in the House of Representatives and here the vote of that state was cast by John Scott who was its sole representative. This member, under the influence of Clay, had gone

<sup>1</sup> Parton's "Life of Andrew Jackson."

over to Adams, much to the displeasure of Benton. He threatened Scott to no advantage and Missouri voted for Adams who was elected. It was quite natural that Clay should cast his influence in the Massachusetts man's favor, seeing that in general the two were more nearly in political accord than any other combination of candidates. Out of that contest flowed the dominating currents in politics for many years to come.<sup>1</sup>

The fact that Adams' election was so warmly contested rendered his position weak, but he proceeded to make the situation worse by naming Clay for Secretary of State, thus originating the "Corrupt Bargain" story which followed Clay so long as he lived and which at least once defeated him when nominated for president and perhaps twice prevented him from getting the nomination when he could have been elected.

In order to make Adams unpopular a trick was resorted to which was ignoble but sufficient for the purpose required. Long after it was known that Clay's influence would be cast for Adams, but before the final vote, an anonymous letter appeared in a Philadelphia newspaper announcing that a corrupt bargain had been made whereby Clay would be-

<sup>1</sup> Parton's "Jackson."

come Secretary of State. Clay was perfectly sincere in his denunciation of this statement and in his announcement that he would call the author of the libel to the "field of honor." Very soon, Mr. Kremer, a member of the House from Pennsylvania, announced himself as the signer of the letter; but Clay was so thoroughly convinced that it was prepared by others much higher in the councils of the Jackson party that he refused to accept such a subterfuge, and declined to challenge the Pennsylvanian. Under the code of the times this act put Clay at a disadvantage, and it is hard to see under the circumstances how he later consented to accept the post and thus apparently carry out the exact terms of the bargain.<sup>1</sup>

Adams lacked common sense or he would never have made the offer. Clay was too high strung to refuse it, though he accepted against his inclinations and only at the earnest advice of his friends. Both were conscious of innocence in the matter and were too proud to stoop to conquer public applause by seeming to run away from a libelous publication. When the nomination of Clay was sent into the Senate it was confirmed, but it set the seal of disapproval on the administration. After that

<sup>1</sup> Niles' Register : 1825.

there was no possibility that Adams could succeed himself, and little chance that Clay could escape condemnation, as in fact he did not.

Benton was not one who believed in the story of the corrupt bargain by which Clay was said to have bartered his votes for the premiership. Clay told him early in the contest that he favored Adams, and Benton gave this information currency in the newspapers and in conversation. Hereafter the great Missourian followed the Jackson star and succeeded in most of his political undertakings so long as it was in the ascendant. This was not so much because he was dominated by Jackson as because in those particular lines in which he was most interested Benton was able to dominate the Democratic leader. The two men were diametrically opposite in most respects and yet there were points of contact in their natures which served to make the dual alliance of great import to the country.

Benton was now beginning to find his true place in the Senate. He was vain of his oratory for very insufficient reasons and customarily had his speeches printed for circulation in Missouri. His first check came from the venerable Rufus King, then in his last years in the Senate, who had served his country for five decades and was, with Nathaniel

Macon, a survivor of the Revolutionary period. This arch Federalist came over to Benton one day after he had made a bitter speech against the Chesapeake canal appropriation (which Monroe later vetoed) and spoke to him with the authority and tenderness of a father. He remarked that while he had watched Benton's rising powers with interest and admiration, and believed he had a great future before him, his attitude of assumed authority and defiance sat ill upon the older members. This rebuke was given with such dignity and real concern that it touched Benton's heart at once and he wrote his wife fully of the incident, saying that he would not publish the speech which had been criticised and would endeavor to amend his temperament. He succeeded partially, though it was not until many years later that he mellowed and assumed toward the younger members of the Senate the same attitude which King had adopted toward himself.<sup>1</sup>

At the opening of Congress in the December of Adams' administration the Senate was found to be strongly opposed to the President. This was largely the result of the bitterness which arose from the settlement of the election and the appointment of

<sup>1</sup> Benton's "View."

Clay. The House was on the side of Adams, showing that so far as the popular will could be expressed, the people were with him, although the situation changed at the next election and Adams never was able to secure from Congress that legislation which he so greatly desired.

The first matter of great public moment concerned the Panama Congress, the subject of so many brilliant expectations, though it turned out to be so complete a fiasco. The intention of the South Americans who originated the idea was to call a meeting of representatives of all the American republics in an attempt to bring about closer commercial and political relations, provide for the common defense against foreign aggression, and establish certain rules among themselves which in so far as the contracting parties were concerned should have the effect of international law. This was a brilliant conception, one which appealed to the imagination of many Americans and to no one more than to Secretary Clay. Adams of course was in favor of the enterprise because when he was Secretary of State he had been largely responsible for the promulgation of the Monroe Doctrine. Viewed as an abstract proposition it seemed to have everything to commend it, but in an age when there

were no railways, telegraphs, cables, or ocean steamships, there were more difficulties to overcome than appeared on the surface.

In the first place, few of the Latin republics were firmly established. There was little educated intelligence among the people and already the revolutionary spirit which has continued to this day had begun to manifest itself. The possibility of the nations agreeing to anything that should be respected by all, or which recalcitrants could be compelled to respect, seemed to practical minds very small indeed. Moreover there were many who felt that the Monroe Doctrine must not be pushed too far. Benton believed (and affected to think that Adams took the same ground) that we never had done and never could do more than protect our own borders from European colonization, but this narrow interpretation is absurd since it needed no special message of the President to state such a proposition.

The crisis was reached when the names of delegates to the Panama Congress were sent to the Senate by the President. This action precipitated a fracas of large dimensions. In the debates which followed it is fair to suppose that some of the opponents of the administration believed they were taking the only logical ground, but it is certain that politics

had a great deal to do with the matter. Objection was entered at once that the President had no right to make such nominations without the previous authorization of Congress and information was asked as to the nature of the proposed mission and the subjects that the delegates from the United States would be likely to discuss. The President replied in a dignified letter stating that commercial relations, contraband and neutral goods in war, foreign aggression, the relations with Cuba, and such matters were to be treated.

The peculiar fact about this answer was that it eliminated one subject which had been named by the South Americans and which had caused great excitement all over the United States—namely the status of Haiti. At that time the negro republic had been in existence for some years but there had never been any but commercial relations between it and us. We had some trade but no consuls or ministers were sent by either nation to the other. Indeed the slaveholders were filled with fear whenever they thought of the horrors of the negro rebellion whereby Toussaint L'Ouverture drove out the French with such terrible slaughter and established a government. There was constant apprehension that such an experiment might be repeated in



this country. The South and Central Americans were moved by no such considerations. There were negroes and mulattoes among the generals and statesmen of those countries and they were considered to be on an equal footing with those of proudest Castilian blood. The Latin republics were willing to enter into relations with Haiti and this very fact made many of the senators from our Southern states look askance at the proposition.

Benton delivered a speech at this time in which he called attention to the omission in Adams' letter and denounced a congress to be held in Panama where matters pertaining to the interests of the United States should be discussed,—that could not be discussed in Washington.<sup>1</sup> It cannot be said that in this matter Benton acted with his usual sound judgment. He unintentionally took exactly the course which he later so roundly denounced in others,—that of stirring up sectional strife on the slavery question. Benton, however, was deeply engrossed in politics and was willing to do anything reasonable to drive the administration to the wall.

The debate finally produced nothing of importance but the duel between Clay and Randolph. In this duel Benton acted as the mutual friend of

<sup>1</sup> See chapter on "Benton as Author and Orator," *passim*.

both and an arbiter in all matters pertaining to the code. It was a bloodless affair and a reconciliation followed. Randolph had desired Benton to act as his second but under the code the relationship of the latter to Mrs. Clay made it impossible. Randolph, to show his appreciation of Benton's services, had made for him a gold seal on which was engraved a crest furnished by the obliging College of Heraldry in London and said to belong to the family. Benton laughed at the crest and an alleged family tree of distinguished membership but wore the seal until his death.

The Panama Commission was finally authorized, but it was more than sixty years before such a Pan-American Congress met and then it did so in Washington where much less was accomplished under happier auspices than was proposed in 1825.

During Adams' entire administration there was no other thought on the part of the opposition than of making Jackson president in 1828. Clay was eliminated; Calhoun was content for the present with the vice-presidency, seeing that the Jackson wave was rising, and hoping to succeed him. Clay was of course in favor of his chief but the fight against Adams was concentrated and bitter. The election was a foregone conclusion. Jackson

easily won the electoral college and his showing in the popular vote was very respectable. Had Adams refrained from appointing Clay, had he been possessed of a more engaging personality, had he been less disposed to lecture Congress collectively and the members individually, he might possibly have been reëlected ; though on the whole it seems certain that the march of democracy was so rapid that his reëlection was never for an instant possible. The growth of the West, the unfettering of restrictions on voting in the Eastern states, the belief in the righteousness and power of pure democracy—all joined to make Jackson the candidate and secured his election.

This was one of New England's darkest hours. Twice she had seen her presidents rejected. The first time John Adams, one of the greatest of her sons, was discarded for Jefferson who was considered an atheist, a revolutionary, and a dangerous man generally. The New Englanders had indeed seen the country barely survive the shock of his administration for Mr. Madison's war was its direct inheritance. Now another Adams met a similar fate and they could scarcely believe that civilized government would withstand the blow resulting from the promotion of a backwoods militia general to the presi-

dency. With all his faults Jefferson was a gentleman ; here was a man who was rude, almost barbarous.

Benton had no faith in such pessimism. He was a democrat at heart and with all his personal vanity he expected to see democracy rise triumphant on the ruins of federalism, Eastern formalism and the prejudices of the old republicans. None rejoiced more than he when Jackson won and to no person during his eight years of incumbency was the hero of New Orleans more beholden than to the man whom he had earlier met in deadly combat in a street brawl.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Roosevelt's "Life of Benton."

## CHAPTER V

### JACKSON'S RIGHT ARM

“THE reign of Andrew Jackson” lasted from 1829 to 1841. During the last four years Van Buren was in the White House and his career was a stormy one ; but the whole period was dominated by Jackson’s policies and, so far as the triumvirate of Clay, Calhoun and Webster permitted, Jacksonian legislation was enacted. It was during this period that Benton’s most serious work was done. During most of the time he was Jackson’s right arm and led the Jacksonian interest in the Senate, though for a while it was a minority as against the triumvirate. In this era Benton was intimately connected with four great matters of public policy. They were :

Nullification and the Tariff,  
Destruction of the National Bank,  
The Specie Standard,  
The Distribution of the Land Surplus.

There were many other issues of minor kinds but

these were the most important and they furnished the material for political discussion until the Mexican War brought forward new ones.

Benton originated only one of the policies of the administration, but he fought out all of them in the Senate. Without his aid Jackson would have soon come to grief. Although he was a devoted follower of his chief, Benton never claimed to be his mouth-piece and rather resented such a notion, for he declared that he was independent and wished it to be understood that he decided every question on its merits. This disguise was thin as in those days a man must be either for Jackson or against him ; he could not be lukewarm. It was as a fighter that Benton excelled. He never equivocated, never compromised, never became discouraged by defeat.

At the outset of the administration Benton was much distressed over Jackson's high-handed dealing with the patronage. In these days we are apt to consider that "Old Hickory" was the greatest foe of civil service reform that ever lived ; that he was the originator of the principle, if not the expression, "to the victors belong the spoils." This is true only in the sense that he overrode all previous traditions and made more changes than all his predecessors combined. It must not be understood,

however, that he was ruthless in his decapitations. In the departments involving the judicial functions of the nation, even as touching land commissions and the like, he made almost no removals and only then for cause. Benton did his best to show that Jackson was not so bad as he was painted, but with no great success, since the changes which he made created as much excitement as if a president to-day by administrative order were to revoke all the civil service rules and oust every man possible.

An incident may be related. The collector at Salem was General Miller, a Federalist whom Jackson had marked for dismissal. He had nominated his successor. Benton heard this news with great agitation and approached the President at once, asking if he knew who this General Miller was. He did not.

“He is the hero of Lundy’s Lane,” said Benton.

“The man who when asked to take a battery said, ‘I’ll try’?”

“The very man.”

“By the Eternal!” shouted Jackson as his fist came down on the table, “that man shall be in office as long as Jackson is President,” and the order for dismissal was at once revoked.

The incident is instructive as showing Benton’s

desire to keep the service intact and in explaining the fiery temperament of Jackson. This was an age when nepotism was largely practiced. Benton in all his public life never asked an office or a public contract for a member of his own family. He was a rugged believer in maintaining the integrity and independence of the civil service and disliked having anything to do with recommending men to positions, even when there were vacancies to be filled.

Before taking up the subjects which proved to be the greatest in Benton's career and so influential in politics for more than thirty years, it is well to observe that he became an ardent foe of the Navy. He believed, of course, in a moderate establishment, but asserted as many of his successors have done to this day, that a large navy is simply an incentive to international broils, and that in any event we could not depend upon it in case of war. This indicated a rather narrow view of the subject, considering that it was the despised Navy that had won most of the honors in the late war, in which Benton had figured most inconspicuously. But he was alarmed at the tremendous cost of the fleet, and being a rigid economist, always singled it out for retrenchment whenever possible. In his many



speeches he was willing enough to admire exhibitions of personal valor, but he did not consider the establishment necessary on the basis favored by the majority. This seems to have been a fault of his training and experience. Benton was not commercial in instinct, nor did he until late in life come at all in contact with those forces in the East which were so potent in national development. Even then it was with constant surprise that he discovered that manufacturing and shipping were not necessarily tinged with a peculiar selfishness and a lack of patriotism.

It was on somewhat different grounds that he attacked the Military Academy at West Point. He was never tired of branding this institution as expensive and as training young men in a way that was contrary to existing theories. It was alleged that the soldier was born, not made. This notion has long been abandoned, but in Benton's day there was some justification for it since the Academy was a new institution, feebly administered. Benton had grown up on the frontier ; had served under Jackson whom he considered the greatest general of the age ; was familiar with the careers of the Clarks, Harrison and others who had sprung from the soil and made good military records. His

argument was weak in that it failed to recognize that a good man is made better by training. As we shall see later he was willing and anxious to command all the armies of the country, in spite of the fact that he had never been in a battle in his life.

Though Benton talked long and often concerning the Navy and West Point, he never succeeded in impressing his fellow members with the worth of his suggestions, and these can hardly be made railing accusations against him.

The first crisis in Benton's political career came in the contest over nullification, and strangely enough he was for a time allied with the forces which were attempting to establish that doctrine, always so hateful to him. It need hardly be said that in this he was unconscious of the aid he was giving them, and it was but a short time before the scales fell from his eyes. Benton seems to have been a guileless sort of person. Conscious of the rectitude of his own views, he was loath to attribute any sinister designs to others. Considering his later career it is astonishing to find him early in the Jackson administration a supporter of the views of Hayne and Calhoun, utterly failing to note the trend of events. Little has been said thus far of the growth of the views of the ultra-slavery men for the very reason

that to understand the career of Benton, we must follow him in his ignorance. Now that he was to have his eyes opened it is necessary to give some account of the political situation in the winter of 1829-30.

We have seen how Calhoun retired from the contest for the presidency with apparent gracefulness, and there were those who supposed he had eliminated himself from the struggle for the succession. This was by no means the case. Under the circumstances Jackson seemed a desirable stop-gap and Calhoun and his friends were perfectly willing to have him serve a term while they perfected their plans a little better. Jackson was an old man and far from vigorous. He had at first no idea of accepting a second nomination. His beloved wife was dead, his health was poor and he was content to enjoy the distinguished honor for a single term. But for the nature of the opposition it is not likely that he would have entered the lists a second time. An arrogant man in some respects, he was gentle in his demeanor toward friends and was more cultured than his enemies supposed. He could stand almost anything but imputations against his honor or integrity, or an attack upon the motives of his public actions. He loved a fight in secret as well as in the

open, and was no mean antagonist as all his opponents had discovered ; but he had no love for the devious ways of politics unless he was forced to employ them on his own account. At his inauguration he was well affected toward Calhoun, and it was some time before he discovered that the South Carolinian was not so true a friend as he thought.

Politics for their own sake employed more of the attention of public men in that day than now. There was a lust of power and an ambition for preferment that now tend to disappear. For personal profit politicians and statesmen contend vigorously, but there is less direct striving in the open for the presidency and other honorable offices. Calhoun had lost his earlier frankness of manner and surrendered his liberal views on national questions. He was becoming less and less a national statesman, more and more a speculative philosopher, and his mind was more exclusively turning toward the interests of the South,—toward cotton and the peculiar institution of slavery. On the whole, he was a better man than the North for many years was willing to believe. He devoted the best twenty years of his life to expounding and propagating the doctrine of nullification which was only, so far as he would admit, a purely intellectual

and moral denial by the states of the right of the Federal government to infringe on their reserved rights. He did not believe in forcible resistance to national authority—so he said—but unless this was employed his theories fell to the ground. Academic opposition in statecraft is silly, and though to the last Calhoun professed himself a Unionist he developed a school of politicians who were ready to carry his doctrines to their legitimate and practical conclusion. Even Jefferson Davis twenty years later called nullification absurd, and admitted that the only alternative was revolution which he tried as a last resource.

Much of the difficulty which now arose, and which continued for a generation and more, was due to the fact that there were in this country two separate and distinct civilizations. The North comprised a number of states which were republics in the best sense of the term. The towns or townships were as a rule pure democracies and the state governments rested upon the just consent of the governed, affected only by the political machination of the age. As perhaps neither party was in the latter respect any better than the other there occurred as a rule that “cancellation” of fraud, imposition and undue influence which is requisite to

maintain anything resembling a pure and righteous government. When all or a preponderating portion of the fraud is on one side a decadence follows rapidly; but in the North this was on the whole less noticeable, certainly less continuous, because of the intelligence of the people, the general use of the franchise and the fact that towns were so important in the entire scheme of government.

In the South where the county system prevailed politics had a different aspect. The franchise was nominally extended to white freemen, but as a matter of fact was controlled by the large planters in much the same way as the British suffrage had for centuries been controlled by the great landowners of England. Even the "poor whites" seldom attempted any direct interference in politics. The great slaveholder had, besides his black flock, a body of retainers which he could depend on as certainly as the feudal lord of the Middle Ages. While it was customary for the leaders of the Southern party to berate the men of the North for their subserviency to trade, their desire for wealth and their anxiety for laws favorable to private interests, the truth is that the mind of the South was wholly occupied with economic questions. Cotton and slavery were the things which were largest in their horizon and

their opinions on these subjects came to affect their views of everything else. This is not singular. The North was similarly engaged in trying to promote its own interests, and the difficulty came from a difference in temperament and a divergence of opinion as to what was really the best national policy. Cotton was fast becoming king. Even under the crude system of cultivation which prevailed, large fortunes were being accumulated, and the planter was anxious to extend his estates, increase the number of his slaves and assume a sort of hegemony in his section.

Except in the cotton belt, and there in only minor degree, slavery was not in its outward aspects the horrible institution that it seems to us now, or as it seemed to the Northern people at that time. That the negroes as a rule were little above the brute was the common belief, and much of the treatment was brutish as compared with that accorded white men. But all things are relative, and if the negro suffered much physical pain, was underfed and overworked, according to Northern standards, it must not be assumed that the system was altogether bad in its economic phases, since self-interest led masters to treat their slaves as well as their cattle. Had the negro been more enlight-

ened, had he been used to better things, had he possessed a spirit of independence and had slavery sat upon him like a galling yoke, the suffering would have been greater ; but in that case the system would not long have existed since he would have successfully revolted against his master.<sup>1</sup>

It is of interest to digress here and tell of a movement inaugurated by Benton in Missouri in 1828, which came very near doing away with the Missouri Compromise. Though slavery had increased in that state, it was found that it interfered to some extent with immigration, and there were plenty of arguments in favor of gradual abolition. These were endorsed by Benton, who at the time of the admission of the state had been the boldest of anti-restrictionists. Perceiving that morally and economically emancipation would be for the best interests of the country, Benton and a large number of the leading men of Missouri met in conference and agreed upon a policy of gradual emancipation by constitutional amendment, which would have led the way to similar action in other border states. The plans were carefully prepared and it seemed as if the clouds might lift from the country, when there occurred one of those incidents which seem

<sup>1</sup> Fanny Kemble, "Two Years on a Georgia Plantation."



more like fiction than real history. The Missourians heard with dismay that Arthur Tappan, the merchant prince and philanthropist of New York, had entertained colored people at his private table. That ended the matter. No further move was made, and the subject was dead for many years afterward.<sup>1</sup>

All institutions based on immoral or uneconomic conditions are timid and suspicious. Slavery was the corner-stone of the Southern system of industry and commerce, and that it was unsafe was freely admitted, except in partisan debate. It must be increasingly safeguarded, explained and apologized for with the result that the slave owner was angered and embittered, because he thought that he was being constantly assailed by those who pretended to be holier than he. Such criticism is one of the most difficult things in the world to endure with equanimity and self-possession, and forbearance was not the chief virtue of the South. Now it is not true that at this time there was any excess of individual virtue on the part of the North. Most Northern people who went South became slaveholders. Most Southern men carried on business with the North and the alliance was close. It is true, however, that for the advantage the South may

<sup>1</sup> "History of Missouri," American Commonwealth Series.

have had in the way of human slavery, and in its increased political power, which was gained by counting three-fifths of the slaves, the North felt that it should enjoy protection to its industries. The North was more shrewd and adventurous, far more successful in business, and the westward expansion of the population was constantly inuring to the benefit of the free states.

So long as the Virginia dynasty was in power the South had no fear. Monroe had, however, proved intractable to some extent and the younger Adams was utterly opposed to the Southern policies. Seeing that the South had been in control of the government practically the whole period of our national existence and that Jackson himself was a Southern man and a slaveholder, it is peculiar that the dread of any should have been aroused over the loss of political authority. That fear was less influential in shaping coming events than the desire of particular Southern leaders to gain place and power, and they affected to believe many things which made their conduct more or less necessary and which were most of them miserable ghosts.

The actual fact was that Calhoun desired the presidency, and his many friends wished to participate in the distribution of the patronage. This

was not for financial reasons, since emoluments of office were then very small, but because of lust of power. It was peculiarly true that Southern men loved promotion, because of their political institutions which in the aggregate developed an office-holding class and reduced the ordinary voter to a subordinate place.

The sectional question was soon to make its appearance in Congress in a very virulent form. The matter of the public lands was ever dear to Benton and anything that affected them was certain to receive his immediate attention. He had not at this time succeeded in securing all of the legislation for which he labored, but his ten years had resulted in a much more liberal policy than formerly. Under his system the individual homesteads were rapidly growing in number in all parts of the West. The stream of emigration was flowing constantly toward the setting sun, and most of the foreigners who came to this country hastened to secure the cheap and good lands. At the same time New England was being constantly denuded of its younger people who went West on parallels of latitude. The South was slower to take advantage of its opportunities but the border states, especially Kentucky, were filling up Indiana, Illinois and Missouri.

Here was a condition which made some of the New England leaders groan. The youth and strength of the section were going West and it was evident that the relative importance of the East would soon be lost. It is strange that there was no confidence in the institutions which these young people had absorbed at home, no belief that New England principles would be carried to the far West. On the contrary there was a feeling that while there had long been a North and a South, there would now be also a West, and a three-cornered contest was certain to ensue in which the older states were likely to be worsted. This situation was not to be contemplated with equanimity for a moment, and the outcome of the opposition to the new order of things was a resolution offered by Senator Foot, of Connecticut, to the effect that the sale of public lands should be restricted to those in the market and that the office of the public surveyor should be abolished. This meant relegating the whole of the unsurveyed public domain to chaos,—taking it out of any possible political affiliation for the immediate future. It was to be an artificial barrier placed across the pathway of development for the benefit of the older Eastern states. The motive of the resolution was largely political,

but the author could not have imagined the results which were to follow. The debate opened at once and lasted for a long time, during which nearly everything but the land question was taken up in detail.

Benton, ever impetuous and more than ready to speak, was the first to take the floor. He opposed the resolution not only with all the logic and practical wisdom of which he was possessed but with more physical energy and objurgation than at first seemed necessary. He raged up and down the semi-circular chamber and talked in most extravagant language. He spoke not only against the principle of the resolution, but he gave some vivid pictures of the actual results of the existing policy by which the national debt was being extinguished and plenty was being cast over a smiling land. Here he was in his element and his abilities as an actor stood him in excellent stead. He was more vociferous than may have been required, but in truth he was as earnest as an apostle and sincerely anxious to denounce any restriction upon the extension of the country. He saw nothing in the whole matter but an attack on the West of which he believed himself to be the leading exponent.

It ought to be said that the government survey

by townships, sections and "forties" was an institution the value of which can hardly be over-estimated in considering the growth of the United States. It was the climax of labor saving invention as applied to population extension and to have rejected it at this time would have resulted in worse disasters than even Benton imagined. The principle of least resistance never worked to better advantage than in this method of distributing the public domain.

While Benton, "in a fine frenzy rolling," was attacking this resolution, Calhoun sat in the chair waiting for a political vantage point. It came sooner than he had anticipated, and from an unexpected quarter. The subject of slavery had been injected into the debate,—sure to be the case when territory was involved. In a brief speech on the subject, Webster, without that preparation which he ought to have had, announced that the doctrine of freedom of territory was a Northern one; that the Ordinance of 1787, by which slavery was forever prohibited in the Northwest Territory, was introduced and carried by Northern votes alone. This was a singular lapse upon the part of the "descended god," who was beginning to feel that the ægis was in his rightful possession. It was due to carelessness and

misapprehension which lasted for many years, and by which New England men, without much contradiction, constantly ascribed all the political virtues and accomplishments of the nation to their own section. We can scarcely blame New England for this, since she was so little disputed at the time; but history has not been able to sustain all the claims so largely and vociferously put forth in her behalf. In asserting therefore that freedom in the Northwest Territory was a Northern measure, Webster made a mistake, but a natural one. This gave Benton the opportunity he sought, and he delved into history and musty records with more enthusiasm and love of detail than Webster could ever command. In a second speech he showed that Webster was entirely wrong; that the proposition emanated from Jefferson; that at the last it was unanimously adopted; and that the South was as much entitled to credit for the measure as the North, perhaps in the last analysis to greater credit. To this Webster answered not a word either in the way of explanation or apology. It is probable that he was convinced, but those were not the days when a man felt it incumbent upon him to admit that he was in the wrong.

If the discussion had gone no further we should

never have heard of it in history. That it was extended and widened was due to the fact that Calhoun saw a chance at this point to exert himself in favor of his particular propaganda. This was entirely legitimate; criticism must lie only against the methods used. The debate had introduced the matter of free and slave states, and that was enough for the purposes of the Calhoun party. They were sufficiently shrewd to see that Southern political control could come only by attaching to the Southern interest a portion of the growing West, which was the disturbing factor in the political balance. The injection of the question of the restriction of land sales made an issue which was not only revolting to the West, but seemed almost providential to the followers of Calhoun. Here originated the idea of the coalition between the South and the West, which figured so largely in the debates and more or less in actual politics for a long time to come. Calhoun was represented on the floor by Robert Y. Hayne, also of South Carolina, a man of many resources intellectually, of engaging personality, and devoted to his chief. There were men in that Senate of more intellectual and moral power than Hayne, but they have been forgotten, while he is remembered because of the



contest which has lastingly linked his name with that of Webster. This young man took up the gauntlet and made some references to nullification in the Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions of 1798, looking upon them as charters of more importance than the Constitution, since they were supposed to have been the work of Jefferson and Madison respectively, men whose opinions were then held in the highest esteem by a great majority of the electors of all sections.

This introduction of the term "nullification" into the debate was not fortunate for the slavery propagandists. It roused the sleeping lion in Webster, who cared less for mere technicalities than for broad principles. To him nullification was maddening, and in desultory debates he expressed his views in a way that seemed to require an extended reply. This was supplied by Hayne, not so much on his own account, as in his capacity of mouthpiece of Calhoun, whom he consulted at every stage of the contest and from whom through the long debate he nightly drew inspiration.

It is generally agreed that Hayne discussed the subject in question before the Senate in an admirable manner. But neither he nor any one else could be confined to the matter of limiting the

sales of public lands, and must needs run off into a discussion of the whole subject of politics past, present and future. It fared it with this Roderick when he brought up the subject of nullification as laid down in the aforesaid Resolutions of 1798, and worse when he introduced the matter of the Hartford Convention, which seemed a particularly fitting weapon with which to attack a New England senator. Now the truth is that the Hartford Convention, though not officially representing New England, had just enough official status to make it seem formidable at the time it met. New England was disaffected regarding the War of 1812, and though doing her share in the field, there was a feeling of revolt in the whole section that was well manifested in the Hartford Convention. It was most fortunate for New England that before that body was enabled to lay its propositions before Congress news came of the peace. After that there were somewhat fewer than forty very respectable men of New England who were only too glad to court oblivion. The serious student must admit that if the war had continued in a disastrous way for a year longer the Hartford Convention might have reassembled and recommended dissolution in some way or other, and there is much reason to believe

that this might have been the result. At least a most violent disturbance would have ensued. Fortunately none of these things happened, and in the joy over the cessation of hostilities the obliquity of New England had been for the time forgotten.<sup>1</sup>

When Hayne brought up the matter he expected that Webster would not only apologize for his section but attack the South. That godlike statesman was too shrewd for this. In a long and earnest speech he attempted to keep the subject within bounds, and to uproot the notion that there was anywhere in the North an idea of separation or that there were actual warring and conflicting interests which were to be affected by the legislation proposed. These earlier speeches were on both sides a mixture of the academic and the practical. Hayne, taking the initiative, managed to make a fine impression because he had the popular side on the main question. He returned to the attack. There was a degree of formality and impersonality in debate in those days which deceived no one as to the intent of the participators. The contest was becoming warm and it was now Calhoun against Webster. In a colloquy during Hayne's speech Webster tried to corner him, to find out whether

<sup>1</sup> Henry Adams, "History of the United States,"

he considered nullification justifiable on the ground of the Hartford Convention. Hayne was too wary to be caught in such a trap and evaded the issue. He could not claim any actual legislative sanction for the Resolutions of 1798, and if he avowed that nullification was the foundation stone of the Hartford Convention, it was likely he would be thrown out of court by a repudiation of that unofficial and officious assemblage which all New England was anxious and in good position to renounce. Hayne parried the thrust, but proceeded to attack New England for her recreancy in the late war, and to show in general how much more the nation owed to the South than to the North. It was a brilliant speech, a clever presentation of a specious argument, but it had the fatal defect of trying to prove too much.

It was characteristic of the magnitude of Webster's appreciation of the whole subject and its details that he refused to be drawn into any controversy over patriotic bookkeeping. He had no mind for settling petty balances by weight of sword or glory. He came to the task with a brain stored full of the richest imagery and was dominated by the broadest patriotism. It should be said in all honesty that Webster was to a great extent the product of his environment. We can believe that if he and

Calhoun had been exchanged in their cradles the individual result would have been very different. Both were intellectual giants and both had primarily the interests of their own sections at heart. It may be that Calhoun would never have attained to the majestic intellectual stature of Webster in any case: it is also doubtful whether Webster could ever have reduced the whole question of national government to Calhoun's basis. But on the whole it may be said that the two men represented two sectional ideas, although it was the good fortune of Webster to be greater than his party, while Calhoun was his party. Webster had many limitations but when he was stirred to the depths he was no section's candidate, no man's adherent; he saw before him but one star in the horizon, and that was the Union, which he pursued and loved and adored, and well had it been for his fame had that been the sum of his ambitions. At this time he seems to have been devoid of personal aspiration and, aside from the defense of his own section, was actuated solely by patriotic motives. His final reply to Hayne which was dragged from him under duress and earlier than he wished required that he state once and for all the position of the people of the North in relation to the growth of

the republic, their views on slavery as a political asset and on nullification as a measure tending to national bankruptcy. He was obliged in this case to eliminate much that had been discussed and to ignore entirely the original subject of debate, which as he humorously said was the only one that had not been taken up in the whole controversy.

With great shrewdness and with a loftiness of mind that is admirable to contemplate Webster went to the marrow of the real contention that had arisen. He refused to uphold the Hartford Convention, and declined absolutely to enter upon any encomiums upon Massachusetts or the rest of that sisterhood. Rather did he prefer to spend his time in lauding the early patriotism of South Carolina, and in complimenting her sons who had done so much to establish national liberties. Turning from any specious discussion of events, he lifted the whole plane of debate into one so high that it could not but inspire his opponents. His plea was for a nation composed of states and not for a number of states loosely confederated as a nation. He held up the Union in a sense which no human mind had before conceived and no human voice had ever portrayed. He painted a picture which ever since has been unfading, and he erected the temple of the re-

public on foundations which are still lasting. Practically every good American now living has been brought up directly or indirectly upon the teachings of Webster on this occasion, but it should not be forgotten that at this time there was scarcely any man who did not love his state beyond the nation.

Webster closed with that peroration which is still written in letters of gold, and which served thirty years later to unite many states for the defense of the nation, words which in their rich imagery and in their practical application have few parallels in all literature:—

“While the Union lasts, we have high, exciting, gratifying prospects spread out before us, for us and our children. Beyond that I seek not to penetrate the veil. God grant that in my day, at least, that curtain may not rise! God grant that on my vision never may be opened what lies behind! When my eyes shall be turned to behold for the last time the sun in heaven, may I not see him shining on the broken and dishonored fragments of a once glorious Union; on States dis-severed, discordant, belligerent; on a land rent with civil feuds, or drenched, it may be, in fraternal blood! Let their last feeble and lingering glance rather behold the gorgeous ensign of the republic,

now known and honored throughout the earth, still full high advanced, its arms and trophies streaming in their original lustre, not a stripe erased or polluted, nor a single star obscured, bearing for its motto no such miserable interrogatory as 'What is all this worth?' nor those other words of delusion and folly, 'Liberty first and Union afterward'; but everywhere, spread all over in characters of living light, blazing on all its ample folds, as they float over the sea and over the land, and in every wind under the whole heavens, that other sentiment, dear to every true American heart,—Liberty *and* Union, now and forever, one and inseparable!"

It is remarkable that after Benton had listened to this magnificent burst of eloquence, which really expressed his own views, he rose and ridiculed it with that rather coarse sort of wit in those days characteristic of his speeches. He felt that here was a chance for invective and without the slightest fear he called those closing sentences of Webster's mere painted pictures, balderdash and manufactured sentiment gotten up for the purpose of home consumption. Benton was sincere in this. In all this time he could not perceive that Calhoun and his party had a deeper purpose, and



to defeat the Foot Resolution he was willingly led into things which he afterward regretted. Excerpts from his remarks are worth quoting. They form a strange anti-climax to Webster's peroration. He said :

“Among the novelties of this debate, is that part of the speech of the Senator from Massachusetts which dwells with such elaboration of declamation and ornament, upon the love and blessings of union—the hatred and horror of disunion. It was a part of the senator's speech which brought into full play the favorite Ciceronian figure of amplification. It was up to the rule in that particular. But, it seemed to me, that there was another rule, and a higher, and a precedent one, which it violated. It was the rule of propriety ; that rule which requires the fitness of things to be considered ; which requires the time, the place, the subject, and the audience, to be considered ; and condemns the delivery of the argument, and all its flowers, if it fails in congruence to these particulars. I thought the essay upon union and disunion had so failed. It came to us when we were not prepared for it ; when there was nothing in the Senate nor in the country to grace its introduction ; nothing to give, or to receive, effect to, or from, the

impassioned scene that we witnessed. It may be, it was the prophetic cry of the distracted daughter of Priam, breaking into the council, and alarming its tranquil members with vaticinations of the fall of Troy : but to me, it all sounded like the sudden proclamation for an earthquake, when the sun, the earth, the air, announced no such prodigy ; when all the elements of nature were at rest, and sweet repose pervaded the world. There was a time, and you, and I, and all of us, did see it, sir, when such a speech would have found, in its delivery, every attribute of a just and rigorous propriety ! It was at a time, when the five-striped banner was waving over the land of the North ! when the Hartford Convention was in session ! when the language in the capitol was, ' Peaceably, if we can ; forcibly, if we must ! ' when the cry, out of doors, was, ' The Potomac the boundary ; the negro states by themselves ! The Alleghanies the boundary ; the western savages by themselves ! The Mississippi the boundary, let Missouri be governed by a prefect, or given up as a haunt for wild beasts ! ' That time was the fit occasion for this speech ; and if it had been delivered then, either in the hall of the House of Representatives, or in the den of the Hartford Convention, or in the high-

way among the bearers and followers of the five-striped banner, what effects must it not have produced ! What terror and consternation among the plotters of disunion ! But, here, in this loyal and quiet assemblage, in this season of general tranquillity and universal allegiance, the whole performance has lost its effect for want of affinity, connection, or relation, to any subject depending, or sentiment expressed, in the Senate ; for want of any application, or reference, to any event impending in the country."

It is needless to say that Benton often regretted this speech. In vain did some of his friends tell him that not only was he mistaken about the nature of the existing controversy, but that nullification was to be brought forward as a live issue and the President attacked because of alleged usurpations of office. Benton was hard-headed and optimistic. He thought Calhoun was actuated simply by a little excess of zeal so that he might curb the New Englanders. On the whole when the debate was over, and the Foot Resolution had been buried, Benton was congratulating himself that affairs had turned in his favor, and was still unconscious that Jackson was really the object of the objurgations of the senatorial clique. Indeed, it was not until

April when the customary dinner in honor of Jefferson's birthday was given that he learned the truth.

That dinner had been planned long in advance. Calhoun had determined to drive Jackson into a corner. The latter was to give a toast, and while he was hardly expected to say anything radical, he was to listen to other toasts by so many important men setting forth the Democratic doctrine, that he would feel overpowered by the authorities ranged against him. In fact, this backwoodsman, having served his purpose, was to be tossed aside, and the real gentry and statesmen of the South were once more to assume control.

Benton went to this dinner in perfect guilelessness. He arrived early and was surprised to find that he had come to a caucus rather than to a feast. When some of the invited guests learned of the plan they left in high dudgeon. Most of them, however, were privy to the scheme, but were completely disconcerted at the last moment when the President was asked for a toast and offered the memorable words:

"Our federal union—it must and shall be preserved."

This, as has been frequently said, was like the



ghost of Banquo appearing at Macbeth's banquet. It disconcerted all and especially Calhoun who tried to evade the sentiment by proposing a toast in which the rights of the states were made paramount. The scales had now fallen from Benton's eyes, and for the first time he appreciated that there was a serious movement on foot which had for its purpose the elevation of the cotton-planters to power. He had been loath to believe their purpose, but when the fact was too plain to ignore, he took up the fight in behalf of Jackson and the Union.

Jackson had been suspicious from the first; in fact he was by nature as suspicious as Benton was confiding and optimistic. In making up his cabinet Calhoun's friends had been given conspicuous representation. It was evident that a rearrangement must come, and Jackson only awaited the time when it would best suit the political exigencies of the occasion.

It so happened that another element was injected into official life which made the problem easier of solution, without bringing about party disaster. Mrs. Eaton, wife of the Secretary of War, was objectionable to the other women of the official circle and was ostracized. Jackson tried to force Mrs. Eaton's social recognition. Van Buren, Sec-

retary of State, as a widower also did his best to effect this object. He made himself Mrs. Eaton's escort at social ceremonies, and every friend of Jackson of the male sex endeavored to pay her attention, and if possible give her social position. Their efforts were entirely ineffectual. In the end the cabinet must break up, and the three friends of Calhoun were dismissed. Eaton and Van Buren also left, the latter being made Minister to England. The cabinet was completely reconstructed, Benton refusing a seat in it. This experience had a marked effect on Jackson. Throughout the remainder of his two terms his cabinet ministers were as a rule mere clerks, and were seldom admitted into the close circle of his political friends. He had a "Kitchen Cabinet," to the members of which he unburdened himself; they with him arranged every move on the political chess-board. Calhoun and his party were deposed and denied further official favors, but it was soon seen that this was not enough. It was necessary for the administration to take an aggressive attitude and go farther. Calhoun and his friends believed themselves strongly entrenched and had no idea that they could be entirely displaced. A lesser man than Jackson would have met the fate which was prepared for

him at the table of his enemies, but the "Eagle of Tennessee" was not to be caught off his guard. He knew little, it is true, of the wiles of politics and had figured little in national affairs; but he had a profound knowledge of human nature, was a born warrior and took up the gage so promptly that it almost took away the breath of his enemies.

This was his manner of doing it. The press of the day was in many respects feeble compared with that of the present time. The newspapers were few and the news service was weak in comparison with modern standards, but they had an influence not less important than now. The fact that there were so few journals made the power of each more commanding than in later years. In those days the administration newspaper at the capital had a strong position because it was acquainted with the inner secrets and could give the key-note to campaigns in advance. In addition the public printing was valuable enough to make the owner almost a fortune in a single term. At this time the *Telegraph* was the official organ in Washington, and its editor had joined forces with Calhoun in what was supposed to be a coalition that would completely submerge the Jacksonians. The plan was long kept a secret, and many newspapers throughout the

country had been pledged to join the combination. Duff Green, editor of the *Telegraph*, revealed the scheme in an effort to secure the adherence of one of Jackson's friends, then in Washington, who was going to Kentucky to conduct a newspaper in favor of the Calhoun forces. The latter not only refused but brought the plot to the attention of Jackson who made up his mind instantly that he would have a newspaper of his own.

In looking around for an editor he was recommended to secure Francis P. Blair, an occasional contributor to the *Argus*, of Frankfort, Kentucky, who wielded a pen with much vigor and logical force. Mr. Blair was a man of wealth and position in Kentucky, who had no desire to leave his plantation and his snug official berth; but seeing that Jackson needed friends and that the fight was to be vigorous, he abandoned his home, moved to Washington and established the *Globe* as an administration organ, which soon came to be the most influential newspaper the country had ever known. He found in Benton a warm coadjutor. The latter wrote for him frequently and gave him much information as to the progress of events at the capital. Blair became a member of the Kitchen Cabinet, was one of the notable men of his day, and con-



tinued to wield an influence in politics for many years.

When the Senate met in the winter of 1831-2 the rupture between Calhoun and Jackson became complete, their relations being embittered by the publication of documents on both sides. Jackson was vehement enough when there was no particular occasion for it, but when aroused he became a perfect demon. If it had not been for the coalition which Calhoun formed against him; if the theory of nullification had not been pushed so hard; if the President had been allowed to conduct his administration in peace and to have retired gracefully and with honor, much of our history would now read differently. Because Calhoun despised Jackson and ignored him as a man of no political strength, the old warrior made up his mind that he would not only be a candidate for re-election but would put Calhoun out of action altogether if he could. Just how much Jackson was moved by personal considerations, and how much by those of patriotism will never be known, and it is not essential for the purposes of this narrative—only the results are of importance and they are striking in the extreme.

At this session of the Senate, the first coalition be-

tween Clay, Webster and Calhoun was made for offensive and defensive purposes. Each of these men was ambitious for the presidency ; each feared the others, and there was not only no love lost between the members of the triumvirate, but there were years when they were scarcely on speaking terms with one another. It suited their purposes, however, to combine against Jackson, being content when he was slain to fight among themselves for the spoils—a situation which never came to pass, for all of them were killed politically in one way or another by the man whom they despised, aided by Thomas H. Benton.

Benton's leadership became masterful in the war that was made on the confirmation of Van Buren as Minister to Great Britain.

Up to this time there had been little trouble about the confirmation of ministers when the positions were established by law. There had been some wrangling over the question of sending any ministers at all to certain posts, some undignified behavior in making up the mission to Ghent, but nothing further. Van Buren had gone to London and was serenely enjoying his position, little supposing that war was being made upon him at home. Benton was amazed at the coalition and took up

the fight with all possible energy. The objections to Van Buren were childish, and only audacious spleen could account for their recognition among any body of liberal-minded men. It was considered necessary, however, to strike at Jackson through Van Buren, and almost two months were consumed in giving specious reasons for his rejection. Indeed some of the friends of the triumvirate who had little personal interest in the matter, became alarmed and frequently expressed their doubts as to the value of the policy. Calhoun was firm and said of the expected rejection of Van Buren: "It will kill him, kill him dead. He will never kick, never kick."

Unable to prevent rejection Benton succeeded in putting every man possible on record. In the long list of speakers against the minister are to be found the names of nearly all the brilliant men of the Senate. Webster, Clay, Ewing, Clayton, Frelinghuysen, Poindexter, and Hayne were the leaders, but there were others. Though the majority was ample, there were several occasions when just enough of the coalition members left the Senate chamber to give Calhoun a chance for the casting vote on some proposition connected with the matter, which he did in order to inform Jackson that

he was his arch-enemy. Immediately after the final vote was taken Benton remarked to Moore, of Alabama, his next neighbor :

“You have broken a minister and elected a vice-president.”

When the situation was explained to him Moore exclaimed : “Why didn't you tell me that before I voted and I would have voted the other way.”<sup>1</sup>

Benton's words proved more than true, for Van Buren became president also. Such was the recompense that came from giving loyal service to Andrew Jackson.

When rejection was certain Benton wrote a long letter to Van Buren in which it was suggested that he become the Jacksonian candidate for the vice-presidency, and this seems to be the first mention of the idea. The letter is full of Bentonian warmth, and these few sentences are worthy of reproduction:

“You doubtless know what is best for yourself, and it does not become me to make suggestions ; but for myself, when I find myself on the bridge of Lodi, I neither stop to parley, nor turn back to start again. Forward, is the word. Some say, make you governor of New York : I say, you

<sup>1</sup> Benton's “View.”

have been governor before; that is turning back. Some say, come to the Senate in place of some of your friends; I say, that of itself will be only parleying with the enemy while on the middle of the bridge, and receiving their fire. The vice-presidency is the only thing, and if a place in the Senate can be coupled with the trial for that, then a place in the Senate might be desirable. The Baltimore Convention will meet in the month of May, and I presume it will be in the discretion of your immediate friends in New York, and your leading friends here, to have you nominated; and in all that affair I think you ought to be passive. 'For Vice-President,' on the Jackson ticket, will identify you with him; a few cardinal principles of the old Democratic school might make you worth contending for on your own account. The dynasty of '98 [the Federalists] has the Bank of the United States in its interests; and the Bank of the United States has drawn into its vortex, and wields at its pleasure, the whole high tariff and Federal internal improvement party. To set up for yourself, and to raise an interest which can unite the scattered elements of a nation, you will have to take positions which are visible, and represent principles which are felt and understood; you will have to separate

yourself from the enemy by partition lines which the people can see. The dynasty of '98, the Bank of the United States, the high tariff party, the Federal internal improvement party, are against you. Now, if you are not against them, the people, and myself, as one of the people, can see nothing between you and them worth contending for, in a national point of view. This is a very plain letter, and if you don't like it, you will throw it in the fire; consider it as not having been written. For myself, I mean to retire upon my profession, while I have mind and body to pursue it; but I wish to see the right principles prevail, and friends instead of foes in power."

When Van Buren heard of his rejection he took it calmly and came home to realize how true was the statement of one of his British friends that it is often good for a public man to be made the subject of an outrage. The people as a rule are sensible and quick to resent injustice.

Benton was disgusted with the whole affair and though he had achieved the leadership of his faction he had made up his mind to retire at the end of his term and resume the practice of law. This idea he was obliged to abandon because of the urgency of public affairs, and he continued

three more terms in his seat, having many occasions in his long career to see the truth of his paraphrase of the words of Madame Roland :

“Oh politics! how much bamboozling is practiced in thy game!”

## CHAPTER VI

### THE WAR ON NULLIFICATION

THE tariff, a mischievous question at so many periods in our national history, precipitated the first great contest between the North and the South concerning the fundamental nature of the Constitution of the United States.

Henry Clay, the father of the protective tariff system, had succeeded in securing the passage of an act in June, 1832, which its friends freely declared was the most scientific ever devised. It was alleged that the duties had been so skilfully adjusted that the Northern manufacturer got protection only where it was needed to meet foreign competition and in the proper percentage, while the consumer would get many things much cheaper. Even in paying for protected goods it was argued that he would to some extent take money out of one pocket merely to put it in another through the increase of wages and of general prosperity.

The manufacturers had not been entirely satisfied with the tariff—they never are—but they had little



reason to complain of this bill since its duties were the highest that had ever been assessed and the protective feature the most prominent.

The Southern people on their side believed that the exactions of the new measure were not only unreasonable but also unconstitutional. They were the more opposed to protection because it seemed to them that their market for cotton was disadvantageously affected by the system. The planter thought that he received less than he should for his staple, while what he must buy was enhanced in price through the tariff.

The real causes for grievance on the part of the South were the impoverishment of the soil which led to a smaller cotton crop ; the evil and waste of slavery ; and the indolence of the people, induced by such a system of service.

The soil of the Southern states, which by nature was well adapted to the raising of cotton was gradually becoming poorer. The fact that the average yield per acre was declining had been borne in on the planters in a way that troubled them deeply. It was a time when chemistry had hardly yet become a science ; when the knowledge of the functions of nitrogen as a plant food was very imperfect ; and when so little was

known of the manifestations of nature in reproducing her kind that men could not take hold of those simple principles which have since resulted in more or less of a revolution in agriculture. It was undeniable, however, that the crop was declining, or at least the net receipts of the plantations were growing less, and a scapegoat must be found to explain the result. Clay's tariff served this purpose.

The statement made by the Whigs that the country had never been in a more prosperous condition than in 1832 was correct. Cotton went out by the shipload, and the South had the advantage of producing a crop that could be turned immediately into money. In every centre there were "factors" who had, in this country and abroad, principals ready to advance money on crops at usurious rates, but the planter seldom considered this fact. He knew that he had one of the great staples of the world and that it was sure to bring him large returns.

The Southerner was never of that practical turn of mind characteristic of the New Englander who had to watch and pinch and squeeze to make a living, and all the time felt the necessity of accumulating a surplus. He lived in princely style,

entertained regally, and was more apt to find in political conditions than elsewhere the reason for any decline in his income.

Could Yankee ingenuity, thrift, intelligence and wisdom have been transplanted to the Southern cotton-fields, there would have been wealth beyond compare in a section where the people lived in a style which in the large was destructive of the best interests of economy.

We need only to read contemporaneous accounts of life in the Carolinas and Georgia to see how artificial was the civilization which prevailed there.<sup>1</sup> On every estate there was an imposing mansion, and visitors from the North or from Europe marveled at the fact that what were elsewhere considered the necessities of life were ignored in that section. The men lived according to their standards in a comfortable style, kept a good table, a fine stable, bet heavily on horses and cards, gave notes without hesitation and paid them with much grumbling. The Southern man was always optimistic until he was personally pinched. He spent with freedom the money he borrowed, and found

<sup>1</sup> Fanny Kemble, "Two Years on a Georgia Plantation"; Harriet Martineau, "Travels"; De Tocqueville, "Democracy in America," etc.

that the time of reckoning came much sooner than he expected. This is a mild statement of the case based on contemporaneous records which were kept by the Southern people themselves. They enjoyed the world and thought that the earth and the fulness thereof was for them ; the worst of it was that they had so hearty a contempt for people with different ideals, and for those who were forced by circumstances to follow a very different scheme of life.

The Southern congressman as a rule was a lawyer or a planter. His mind was stored with *a priori* views of the Constitution, while he was devoted absolutely to his ideas as to the practical conduct of public affairs. That cotton occupied the largest place in his esteem is not surprising, because it was the chief industry of the section to which he belonged. The Northern man may have been a protectionist or the reverse, may have been a slavery or an anti-slavery man, but he had that immense advantage which comes from actual contact with all sorts and conditions of people. It is not surprising that the good-natured Southerner who lived on a great plantation worked by slaves whom he accorded tolerable comforts, came to look upon the slavery system as economical and benevolent,—

even holding it to be sanctioned by God and the Constitution. He looked upon life according to his environment as nearly all men do and he was quick to perceive anything that touched upon his own peculiar relation. It is only strange when he complained because the New England or the Pennsylvania manufacturers asked for some privilege, such as the new tariff law, that he could not see he already had an offset guaranteed him in the Constitution. Now the Constitution had recognized slavery as a fact and had given the slaveholder an immense political predominance by specifying that three-fifths of his slaves should be counted in making up representation in Congress and in the electoral college. As a matter of fact, the owner of 500 slaves in South Carolina cast votes representing 301 persons, while the employer of 500 men in the North cast only his own vote, so that the Southerner enjoyed a tremendous advantage. But his disposition was such that he considered this a right and not a privilege.

We can see clearly in these days that, even apart from the institution of slavery, there was a great fault in the whole Southern system. There was lack of thrift, of economic perception, and a tendency to spend freely in advance rather than to

accumulate and invest. The actual result was that those esteemed rich were often poor, and nearly all of the cotton planting leaders felt that they had a grievance.

In no state were the South's animosities on the tariff question aroused so deeply as in South Carolina. Calhoun, supported by Hayne, took up the cause of his state, and the South generally, with eagerness.

Much of Calhoun's opposition to the new tariff is often ascribed to his political reverses. The fact is that he was a bitterly disappointed man. When Congress met in December, 1832, the gloom of despair had settled over him and his school of cotton statesmen, in common with most of Jackson's enemies. Their defeat at the presidential election in November had been crushing. There were many explanations but none of them was satisfactory to the disappointed leaders. The truth is they had been outgeneraled by Jackson and Benton and they had appealed to the country on a platform that had been rejected. The South Carolina leader was not only eliminated as a candidate for the presidency, but was fast becoming politically marooned, and that he could never stand. He therefore resigned the vice-presidency, and was sent to occupy a seat in the

Senate where he could take a more active part in affairs.

Hayne, on the floor of the Senate, had done his best to show how the cotton planters would not quietly accede to a protective tariff, but in vain. The time for action seemed to have come, and Calhoun was prepared to test his academic theory of nullification to the last extremity.

A convention of the state of South Carolina was called (following the process by which states are admitted to the Union), and it was solemnly resolved not only that the Tariff of 1832 was null and void, but also that the law of 1828, which had been submitted to for four years, was equally null. The governor was called upon, and the legislature authorized him to take such forcible measures as would carry out these resolutions and refuse payment of taxes to the Federal government after February 1st.

This was nullification. Theoretically it meant no forcible resistance, but considering the authorization, it was reasonable to suppose that force would be used if necessary. There was something sublime in the audacity of this step on the part of one of the sisterhood of states. To be sure it had no effect that can be likened to that which such action would produce to-day after a civil war has deter-

mined the relations of nation and states, but even then it was viewed with alarm by the other members of the Union. It is true that almost every state had many times, through its leaders, threatened disunion, unless its own view as to the policy to be pursued in some particular crisis were accepted; so it is hard to say that up to this date any one section had been more to blame in this matter than another.

It was the first time, however, that resistance was openly asserted, and that it must be forcible, if not ridiculous, was apparent on all sides. There was a spirit of bravado and something of insolence and ignorance in throwing down the gage which had immediate application in the prospective refusal of the South Carolinians to pay the duties levied under the existing tariff law. If this were a threat, it was promptly met; if it were a menace, it proved harmless.

Jackson was as fearless a man as ever lived, and when his cause was just he was thrice armed. He prepared for the emergency as became a soldier and an executive, thus showing more discretion than might have been expected of a son of thunder. He collected a sufficient number of regiments at easy striking distance, sent a war vessel to Charleston, and



thither despatched General Scott, the hero of Lundy's Lane, a Virginian and a patriot. Then he issued a proclamation which told the people of the recreant state exactly what they might expect.

It appears from contemporary history that Jackson wrote the original of this document with a great steel pen, and that his Secretary of State, Livingston, modified it sufficiently to meet the diplomatic needs of the occasion. Even as toned down it was a vigorous paper. To Congress Jackson reported the matter in a dignified way, and proceeded to prepare for eventualities. Just what would have taken place had South Carolina stood her ground can never be known. It was at this juncture that Jackson is reported to have sent word to Calhoun that if he tried to execute any such scheme as he proposed he would hang him higher than Haman, and there is little reason to doubt that he would have gone to such a length if occasion had seemed to require it. He had hanged British subjects on much slighter provocation. As a matter of fact South Carolina had indulged in a "bluff" and her leaders decided that they would take no steps in the matter until the first of February, thus offering opportunity for a compromise.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Sumner, "Life of Jackson."

It is a common impression that on this occasion there was no sort of compromise and that South Carolina surrendered under duress in the most humiliating manner. Well would it be if such a fact could be recorded. The situation was a vexatious one. Jackson, though he was prepared for it, did not wish a conflict any more than the mildest man in the country. In his annual message to Congress he took no backward step in his determination to support the laws, but referred to the tariff as a matter which had occasioned the controversy. There is no doubt he felt that in some respects the measure he had so recently signed contained matters concerning which there was just ground of complaint.

When Clay arrived upon the scene he was not the jaunty, defiant leader of six months before. He had lost his battle for the presidency. Though he never swerved in his love for the Union he did not wish the nation to try the experiment of civil war unless it was necessary and was ready to hedge on the tariff question.

Intense was the indignation of the manufacturers all over the country when they learned that Clay seemed disposed to falter on this subject. The recent law was in general beneficial to them, and already many had prepared to take advantage of its

provisions by enlarging their manufactories. That their late champion should now show signs of weakness was to them maddening and to many beyond belief. It was an inherent weakness of Clay that in times of stress he lacked that clear vision which was essential to his own good. It is true he might have thought that the country had declared against him and that he owed little to those who had refused to support him, or even to the manufacturers themselves who had supported him in vain. This however does not seem to have been a very controlling motive in his action. What he desired was peace and he was willing to have it come on almost any terms, certainly on terms which did him no credit as a political economist or as a constitutional lawyer.

One of two courses was open : to do nothing and let the President deal with the matter in his own way, or else effect some sort of a legislative compromise which would preserve the national honor and at the same time remove the cause of the aggravation. The latter alternative was adopted after many conferences in which Benton had an active part. He did not appear as a leader in any of the legislation which followed, that place belonging naturally to the tariff men who directly or indirectly had been responsible for the outbreak. Any compromise satis-

factory to them was likely to meet with no opposition anywhere.

Clay drafted the bill. His proposal was gradually to reduce the duties for eight years, then cut them down sharply in two years until they reached a maximum of twenty per cent., a rate which was to be maintained thereafter. Perpetually from that time forward the tariff was to be for revenue only. To the manufacturers this proposal was about as comforting and sensible as cutting off the tail of a dog an inch at a time to save him pain.

The passage of the measure was effected in an unusual way. As a revenue bill it must originate in the House, where it had long been debated with little progress. Clay presented a copy of it to Calhoun who now found himself in a very precarious and unhappy situation. He had threatened that his state would nullify the acts of the Federal government unless it changed its policy. Jackson had sternly rejected all suggestions of compromise on the subject of nullification, announcing that the laws were to be maintained at whatever cost and the talk of arresting Calhoun for high treason, and the threat of hanging him became louder and louder. There was no doubt that Calhoun would have been arrested at the first overt act,

and he had no desire to become a political martyr ; while if he did not proceed in the course he had laid down for himself and his state, he must make a humiliating surrender. Clay at this time was not on speaking terms with Calhoun and after an interview which was rather painful, a plan was agreed upon whereby it was to pass. After being worked over in secret in this way, the compromise bill was suddenly sent to the House. By a parliamentary device it was substituted for the bill under discussion and was at once passed without debate. This was an extraordinary proceeding and met with the disapproval of many of the friends of the measure who felt that so important a bill ought not to be dealt with in any such subterranean manner. John Quincy Adams voted against it because he was a protectionist and because he felt that no sop ought to be thrown to South Carolina, so long as she maintained her rebellious attitude. In this position he had many supporters, but the end of the session was near and the majority were anxious for any way of escape from a danger that was so menacing.

In the Senate the measure had already been discussed in the form of a resolution which Clay had offered, and now that the bill itself had arrived the

debate raged warmly. Webster was particularly displeased, and because it was foreseen that such would be his attitude, Clay and Calhoun had not taken him into their counsels. Calhoun, having begun his career as a protectionist, was now working for a reduction of duties, declaring that the policy was unconstitutional. The Tariff of 1816 for which he had voted was avowedly protectionist in principle, and in endeavoring to revert to that measure as a purely revenue bill he was inconsistent. If a forty per cent. tariff is an outrage calling for revolution, and a twenty per cent. tariff is perfectly legitimate, there must be a dividing line between the two somewhere, and it would be interesting to know where Calhoun drew it and on what theory he did so. As a matter of fact his claim that protection was unconstitutional was under the circumstances absurd. The cause of distress was deeper than the tariff and, as was pointed out in the debate, would endure long after that question was disposed of.

Benton's position in this matter was logical and ought never to be lost sight of. He believed that the Union was a permanent institution; that the nation had the power within itself to protect itself, and must do so at any cost. He had no particular

love for a high tariff at this time, and it is evident from what he said and wrote that he had begun to lose faith in the doctrine of protection. Without absolutely repudiating his views he had modified them somewhat as the following extract from one of his speeches indicates :

“The fine effects of the high tariff upon the prosperity of the West have been celebrated on this floor : with how much reason, let facts respond, and the people judge ! I do not think we are indebted to the high tariff for our fertile lands and our navigable rivers ; and I am certain we are indebted to these blessings for the prosperity we enjoy.”

While Benton was therefore personally glad enough to have the duties reduced, he would not countenance a measure which was nothing more or less than a surrender of sovereignty to the threats of a single state and, as a matter of fact, to a few persons in that state. He denied that there was any reason for South Carolina's complaint. It seemed monstrous that her leaders should consider that the South had been ill-treated by the North when, with two exceptions, every president had been chosen from the South, and the two exceptions were New England men, who alone had been refused re-election. The Missouri Compro-

mise, which Calhoun was now beginning to attack and repent of, was really a Southern measure, and had been endorsed by him and his political friends. The failure to secure Texas from Spain when it was possible to do so, was the fault of no man more than Calhoun, who was in the cabinet at the time, and had agreed with Monroe that it would be better to avoid the appearance of a desire to extend the domain of slavery.

Benton was a practical man and had little sympathy with Calhoun or his theories. If there was any real or just cause of complaint he was in favor of having it threshed out and decided man to man by a majority; while Calhoun openly said that a majority was despotic, and that it often became necessary for a minority to nullify its actions. What sort of a government could be maintained on such a basis perhaps Calhoun imagined better than we can, although we shall see that nearly twenty years later he actually suggested some such system for the United States.

Benton continued to assert that there was nothing to compromise, that the proposed measure was a surrender and not a compromise, and that the nation would suffer in dignity by its course. In this position he had the support of Webster.



Whatever Webster's faults he was always a national man, and apart from his desire to have the protective principle retained he could not support a bill which was in effect a quasi-endorsement of the doctrine of nullification. He was in truth a supporter of Jackson on the general subject of preserving the union, and very glad was the old war horse to have such a champion.

The President's position in this time of legislative stress seems to have been quiescent. He waited for the compromise to pass but exhibited little visible interest in the debates.

The rearrangement of votes in the course of a year illustrates the changing character of our politics and shows on how slight a basis the alleged principles of the times were established. If the Tariff of 1832 were essential and desirable in every way in June, it is hard to see why it should be destroyed both as to details and to principle in the following February. Moreover the curious situation resulted that many of those who voted for the new bill (including Clay who was its foremost champion), insisted that it was still strongly protectionist while others supported it because it looked toward free trade. In fact the vote in both houses on this measure was made up very differently from

that of the previous summer and caused Benton and others to wonder where was the profound principle in tariff-making which had been so solemnly endorsed and was now so suddenly abandoned.

When the manufacturers found that there was no recourse but to accept the bill, they did so with the best possible grace, but succeeded in securing many administrative amendments which helped them materially. They were determined, however, that there should at least be an endorsement of the doctrine of protection. There were those who would have preferred a fight to the end then and there, to determine whether a protective tariff was constitutional or not; but as this was not to be the policy, they insisted that Calhoun and the rest of the nullifiers should not only vote for the bill as a whole, but for those administrative details which were particularly nauseous to them. Indeed, partly as a protective measure and partly for the purpose of compelling the nullifiers to declare their principles, the duty on one kind of woolen cloth was raised very considerably to sixty per cent., and this change they must endorse. There was much method in this course, for if the nullifiers voted for the bill they could never say that it was unconstitutional

without accusing themselves of sacrificing principle to policy, which was exactly what they were trying to make the people believe they would never do. Benton has left a careful record of the transaction.

Clayton, of Delaware, took in hand this part of the program—the humiliation of Calhoun—since Clay was felt to be in a delicate position on the subject. The session had only two more days of life when the ultimatum was delivered to the nullifiers, and it brought them to the verge of despair. It was treatment which they had not expected. It would take from them the claim to victory which they had hoped to set up, and few were disposed to vote for the bill, though wishing it to pass. Calhoun tried in vain to have himself excepted from such galling terms, but Clayton was inexorable. He spent one entire night in debating whether he should accede to the demand, finally concluding to do so for the very good reason that if he did not he must be responsible for civil war, and at that time there were few states disposed to follow the leadership of South Carolina. He could not ignominiously surrender, so he agreed to vote but sought to salve his conscience and explain his position to the public, especially to his constituents, by putting on record the reasons for his action.

This movement was speedily checked ; at the last he gave his unqualified assent to the bill and the crisis was passed.

It is well to consider for a moment what would have happened had Benton been given his way at this point in the nation's history, and the whole difference could have been brought to its final issue. Benton was now aware that there was a spirit of disunion in the South. He saw clearly that slavery was at the bottom of it, and it made him hate that institution more than ever, though he remained a slaveholder all his days. His position for a quarter of a century was that there was actually no danger to the slave interest from the North, that all the talk about the need for compromises was ridiculous ; and he repeatedly challenged the radicals of the South to show where there had been a single invasion of their rights. To such demands he could get no categorical answer. Every time Calhoun and others discussed the subject it seemed necessary for them to go back to the beginnings of history and trace the whole principle of government to the present time, when the main point was usually befogged or absolutely lost in the mazes of intricate argument which these orators loved to employ on all occasions. By the time they reached the Reso-

lutions of 1798 most of their hearers were tired and few even read their speeches when printed. It was becoming a fixed principle of belief in the minds of a growing number of senators, that unless the Union were extended so that there should always be exactly as many slave states as free states the country must certainly go on the rocks.

In vain did Benton say that if it did go on the rocks it was because the Southerners would deliberately send it there. They would have nothing but their bond and that was the predominance of the slave interest in the politics of the nation. Well might it have been had Jackson and Benton fought the question to a conclusion then and there. If it had come to war "Old Hickory" would have been at the front; would have overrun South Carolina before the statesmen of that section could have completed one of their fine spun arguments. Then the subject might have been settled for all time. Almost twenty years later another Southern Union-loving and warrior president, Zachary Taylor, was in the White House, and he too wished to try conclusions with the South, but once more Clay and Calhoun had their way and left a heritage of civil war to posterity.

With the Compromise went a land distribution

bill which was to compensate the manufacturing communities in some measure for the loss of protection. It was greedily accepted by nearly all the states. This measure was a part of the bargain for reducing the tariff but with his characteristic independence Jackson disposed of the bill by a pocket veto.

At the same time this measure was grinding through Congress, a "Force Bill" was being prepared for the assistance of the President in collecting the revenue and in better maintaining national authority, so that his hands would be strengthened for future wants, even if the new power should not be necessary for immediate use.

In the debates on the "Force Bill," Benton boldly declared that the Union was and must be perpetual. At another time he said: "It was to get rid of the evils of the old confederacy that the present Union was formed; and having formed it, they who formed it undoubtedly undertook to make it perpetual, and for that purpose had recourse to all the sanctions held sacred among men—commands, prohibitions, oaths."

From this position he never deviated though in the end it cost him his seat in the Senate which he so long had graced,

## CHAPTER VII

### THE NATIONAL BANK

THE war on the Bank of the United States, commonly known as the National Bank, was a rallying point in American politics for fifteen years. It ended not only in the death and bankruptcy of that institution, but in the failure to charter a similar establishment. Originally the question was one of general policy, but it soon became personal. Jackson fought the bank with all the energy and determination with which he had swept the Indians from the face of Georgia. It was Benton who took charge of the contest in Congress, and he was obliged to bear the brunt of the opposition from the most prominent men inside and outside of the Senate who favored the institution.

Just what Jackson thought of the bank when he reached Washington in 1829, is a little obscure, but it would seem that he had no decided convictions one way or the other. His animosity grew as he discovered that his enemies were its friends.<sup>1</sup> The bank

<sup>1</sup> Carl Schurz, "Life of Henry Clay."

had seven years yet to run, and there was no necessity for bringing up the question of recharter. Jackson referred to it in his first annual message in a rather equivocal way, although indicating his opposition on the ground of its unconstitutionality, and the fact that it had failed to establish a uniform and sound currency. The Supreme Court of the United States had already decided that a federal bank was constitutional, but Jackson always claimed that he had sworn to obey the Constitution as he understood it and not as others interpreted it for him.

The bank men were disturbed over Jackson's position, especially as he intimated that if a bank were necessary at all it ought to be a strictly federal one and not a private institution. Benton was not consulted by Jackson on this point, but he was disposed to go much further than the President. He did not want any bank; favored gold and silver as money, and paper only as state banks could furnish it in desired quantities and when based on specie,—in short the condition that exists to-day. The pro-bank men were quite willing to wait until after the elections of 1832, hoping first that Jackson would not be a candidate, or, if he were, that he would be defeated. Benton foresaw that if there



were any delay, the question would drop out of politics for the time being and that before the public mind had been educated up to his view, the recharter would be effected.

In February, 1831, he concluded to force the contest. He introduced a resolution to the effect that it was not expedient to recharter the bank, and on this subject delivered a set speech in which his whole position in finance was set forth. He could not argue against the bank without offering a substitute, and he boldly proclaimed that gold was needed and not paper ; that plenty of gold was being mined in the world, that there was much in this country and, what was of more importance, that our constantly increasing balance of trade would bring us all the precious metals we needed for currency. This speech is more convincing to-day than when it was delivered. The whole proposition was then so startling to most persons that they could not accept it. They laid stress on the fact that the country had been in great trouble after the first bank was not rechartered and that the second was established as a necessity. Benton's argument was largely on the general policy and was not much devoted to actual existing conditions or the conduct of the bank itself, though he did declare that it

had failed of its purposes. His general position may be summed up in the following extract from his speech :

“I am willing to see the charter expire, without providing any substitute for the present bank. I am willing to see the currency of the federal government left to the hard money mentioned and intended in the Constitution ; I am willing to have a hard money government, as that of France has been since the time of *assignats* and *mandats*. Every species of paper might be left to the State authorities, unrecognized by the federal government, and only touched by it for its own convenience when equivalent to gold and silver. Such a currency filled France with the precious metals, when England, with her overgrown bank, was a prey to all the evils of unconvertible paper. It furnished money enough for the imperial government when the population of the empire was three times more numerous, and the expense of government twelve times greater, than the population and expenses of the United States, and, when France possessed no mines of gold or silver, and was destitute of the exports which command the specie of other countries. The United States possess gold mines, now yielding half a million per annum, with every prospect of

equaling those of Peru. But this is not the best dependence. We have what is superior to mines, namely, the exports which command the money of the world; that is to say, the food which sustains life, and the raw materials which sustain manufactures. Gold and silver is the best currency for a republic; it suits the men of middle property and the working people best; and if I was going to establish a working man's party, it should be on the basis of hard money:—a hard money party, against a paper party.”

Immediately after Benton closed this speech Webster called for a vote and it was taken with the result that there were twenty senators against the bank and only twenty-three in its favor. Not a speech had been made for it and indeed there was no man in the Senate who was able to make an adequate reply to Benton. When Webster saw the coming storm, he wrote to Clay saying that he was needed in the Senate, and urging him to accept election. He arrived that fall ready to take up the cudgels against Benton. Clay seems never to have had a just estimate of Benton's powers as a financier, though he crossed swords with him many times in debate. Clay had a wonderful imagination and could make figures and statistics and dry-as-dust details most

entertaining to his audience. Benton had no such gifts, but he could prepare a logical argument and one that could not well be overthrown.

He took up the task manfully and it may be said that he is responsible for the eventual result. Jackson could not well have vetoed the measure had he not felt that Benton was able to support him,—that Benton had so enlightened the people on finance they would not be alarmed over the prospect of seeing the bank disappear.

Early in 1832 the bank sent a memorial to Congress asking for recharter. It had been delayed for some time because there were a few Democrats, close friends of Jackson, who did not like to quarrel with him, and yet favored the institution. It therefore took a good deal of caucusing to bring them together. The memorial was received by both Houses at the same time, and the preliminary votes as to the committees to which it should be referred showed in each case a good majority for recharter. Benton was able to hold his own against Clay or any one else in the Senate, but upon him was imposed the added duty of conducting the contest in the House. He chose a new member, Clayton of Georgia, to whom he supplied ammunition and in this way carried on a double war when it would

have exhausted an ordinary man to look after the matter in one house.<sup>1</sup> Clayton delivered a strong speech from data furnished him by Benton in which twenty-two counts were made against the bank, as to its insufficiency and undesirability in general, as well as to its specific misdeeds. In fact he asserted that it had violated its charter in many ways and was abusing its privileges, robbing the people and defrauding the government, while he insinuated also that it was not in a sound condition. Clayton closed by asking for a committee of investigation to go to Philadelphia and examine the books. This brought on rather prematurely a discussion of the whole subject in which members on both sides were wrought up to great excitement. As the bank had a majority in the House it was first determined to vote down the proposition to investigate, but pretty soon it was seen that this would be bad policy, since it might indicate that there was something to hide. The anti-bank people said it was strange that an institution which had asked Congress for an extension of privileges was unwilling to have its affairs investigated. McDuffie, who as chairman of the Ways and Means Committee, was the majority

<sup>1</sup> Benton, "Thirty Years' View."

leader on the floor, saw this and finally a committee was agreed upon. Benton however was cheated of the opportunity he desired. The Speaker, instead of following the usual rule, making Clayton as mover of the resolution the chairman, took another course. He appointed a committee of seven members of whom three were strong bank men, and three strong anti-bank men, while the seventh was the good-natured Johnson, of Kentucky, reputed slayer of Tecumseh, who did nothing at all but sign the majority report.

There were three reports. The majority in their report spoke strongly against the bank ; indicted it for many violations of its charter ; accused it of being onerous and burdensome to the people instead of the blessing it professed to be ; asserted that by the establishment of many branches, drafts were used as currency, that excessive rates were charged for money, and that it had shown great favoritism to Congressmen and officials favorable to recharter while toward others it had been usurious and unaccommodating. The first minority report was a general defense of the bank, while John Quincy Adams submitted a report of his own which was more judicial than either of the others. In this paper he pointed out certain defects, suggested a

number of remedies and favored recharter under proper restrictions.

Benton maintained the war with great obstinacy for five months. Seeing that the bill would pass he used every possible means to effect delay and attacked every paragraph, offering all sorts of amendments which were voted down. The subject was discussed daily, and Benton enjoyed attacking Webster and Clay for changing their positions in the matter. When Clay was in the Senate in 1810 he had voted against the recharter of the first bank, commonly called Hamilton's, and had made the first important speech of his public career against it. He had declared such an establishment unconstitutional and it made him writhe as Benton repeated his arguments and approved them. In those days political consistency was more of a virtue than at present. Clay got out of the matter as best he could by making a good many excuses, finally admitting that he had been wrong in the first instance. Benton then turned on Webster and quoted that leader's speeches when the present bank was chartered. Webster had opposed the measure and made several very exhaustive speeches in which he declared the bank unnecessary and likely to result in great corruption and disturbance of business.

The Missourian compelled him to eat his words. Benton himself was in no such position. He had opposed the bank from the very first moment he entered the Senate; had sought in vain to compel it to pay interest to the government on its deposits; and had tried to correct its policy in many ways but with no success.

The arrogance of the bank's advocates was exasperating to Benton and his followers. The men of wealth, influence and social position felt that they had affairs in their own hands. Moreover Nicholas Biddle, president of the bank, was a man of many abilities and possessed the fatal gift of literary composition. He wrote letters when he should not have done so and talked too frequently for one who was a petitioner for favors. He and his friends acted too much as if recharter was a right undeniable; a sort of ownership of the country was assumed which was offensive to all democrats, while to Jackson it was maddening.

On the final vote the bank mustered twenty-eight votes and the opposition twenty. In both ranks there were men from every section of the country, so that no territorial considerations affected the measure. In the House there was a majority of twenty-two and the bill went to the President at almost the



same time as the new tariff bill. Clay expected that Jackson would sign both bills, or that if either was vetoed it would be the tariff since the President was not professedly a high protectionist. Jackson did exactly the opposite. He signed the tariff bill, thereby securing the vote of Pennsylvania, and vetoed the recharter bill in a message which was a campaign document quite as much as a state paper. He denounced the monopoly and all its misdeeds in vigorous language and asserted not only that the bank was unconstitutional, but that it had also become such a monster of iniquity that the safety of the people required its destruction. What was gall and wormwood to Clay was the fact that Jackson followed seriatim Clay's speech against recharter of the first National Bank, using his arguments and almost his language.

This opened the floodgates of oratory once more. Up to this time the bank men had largely confined their debates to matters affecting details and had left to Benton most of the general argument. The campaign now demanded some key-notes and they were issued by Webster, Clay and others. Jackson was denounced as a foe of the country, a wrecker of destruction on the business interests and the laboring men, and Webster even went so far as to

express a fear that the country was finally done for. Benton must take up the cudgels for Jackson as usual, though he had some support from others. He replied to every statement of the opposition with logic and with confidence in the future. In the course of this debate he had an encounter with Clay that nearly led to serious results. Clay was bitterly disappointed over the outcome, as it was the death knell to his hopes of the presidency. Seizing upon Benton as the author of his misfortunes he proceeded to berate him in a manner more befitting the stump than the dignified forum of the Senate. To this, however, Benton could make no objection since he himself had been a conspicuous offender in this respect in times past. Clay, who could not accuse Benton of inconsistency in legislation, made much of the fact that in his youth he had fought Jackson and later had become his champion. He also asserted that in the campaign of 1824 Benton had said many things derogatory to Jackson to the effect that the latter was little better than a murderer, a cowardly braggart, and that dirks and pistols would be constantly in evidence if he were elected. This was at a time when Benton was warmly supporting Clay's candidacy on the stump in Missouri.

Such action was short-sighted in Clay, for he ought to have known Benton well enough by this time to see that he would not run away from his own career. Benton acknowledged the fact that he and Jackson had quarreled in youth. He said :

“ It is true, sir, that I had an affray with General Jackson, and that I did complain of his conduct. We fought, sir, and I hope we fought like men. When the explosion was over there remained no ill-will on either side. I repeat, sir, there is no ‘adjourned question of veracity’ between me and General Jackson standing over for settlement. If there had been, a gulf would have separated us as deep as hell.”

Benton then denied he had ever said in Missouri that, if Jackson were elected, members of Congress would need to guard themselves with dirks and pistols. This he declared was a calumny that had been secretly circulated, and he attacked Clay bitterly for using it, intimating that as he had fathered it he might as well take the consequences.

Things were now becoming warm. Clay also denied that there was any adjourned question of veracity between him and Jackson touching any subject whatever, saying that the President had

attacked him and had not made good his case. Taking up the dirk question once more, he asserted that Benton had used the expression, and turning on him asked defiantly :

“Can you look me in the face, sir, and say that you never used that language outside of Missouri ?”

“I look, sir, and repeat that it is an atrocious calumny ; and I will pin it to him who repeats it here.”

Whereupon Clay in excitement cried out :

“Then I declare before the Senate that you said to me the very words.” Here Benton in great excitement shouted, “False! false! false!” members got up from their seats and the fever heat was rising. Continuing, Clay said : “I fling back the charge of atrocious calumny upon the senator from Missouri.”<sup>1</sup>

The situation now became so intense that a personal encounter was narrowly averted. Clay was called to order, but demanded to be heard and the debate as to the parliamentary status of the affair permitted hot blood to cool a little on both sides, whereupon each apologized to the Senate, but not to the other. It was an unfortunate passage at arms and it bore bitter fruit in later years. All

<sup>1</sup> Benton, “Thirty Years' View,”

the oratory of the disappointed bank men could not revive the recharter question, and the session closed with Jackson's star in the ascendant in spite of his numerical minority in Congress.

In the presidential campaign which followed much was made of Jackson's veto and bitter were the anathematizations showered upon him by the Clay men.

Jackson made up his mind soon after his re-election that the National Bank should not live out its allotted term of years. That he had some good reason for his antipathy is undoubted, but it does not appear that the situation was as bad as he and Benton attempted to show. It was sufficient, however, that, after the war began, some of the partisans of the bank had attacked Jackson personally, impugned his motives and furthermore had used bank money in the effort to defeat him for re-election. Jackson himself could scarcely have asked his enemies to pursue a policy better suited to his purpose.

In his original memorandum on the matter of recharter prepared by Benton for use in the House it was intimated that the financial condition of the bank was not sound. Later on he openly charged that it was insolvent. The facts seem to be that the

bank was normally able to meet all its obligations, but that it had been led by the war upon it into a course of action which weakened its position. It had greatly extended its loans to show the public how essential it was to business prosperity. Had recharter been effected it is likely the bank would have fully recovered from the losses which ensued from too confident extensions of credit. There was a great lack of judgment in permitting its affairs to develop into such a condition.

The officers had at first refused to locate a branch at St. Louis because it might help Benton's position. Then when they thought the branch might injure him it was established, and Benton charged that it was active in trying to break his influence in politics, though the effort was fatal.

The law creating the bank had permitted the government to cease depositing public moneys in the institution when the Secretary of the Treasury should so order. This possibility was open, but no one of the bank's officers seems ever to have thought that such a thing would be attempted. As a rule, all Secretaries of the Treasury, of whatever political affiliations, had been favorable to the bank because it was so admirable an engine of finance for the government, and there was no available substitute.

The bank men imagined that Jackson would never undertake to overrule his secretary in such a matter and felt confident in any event that it would be impossible, because the government was a heavy stockholder and could scarcely afford to ruin its own investment.

All this argumentation was very fine and very convincing to reasonable and experienced men in finance, but it argued little knowledge of the character of Jackson. The man who was ready and perhaps anxious to hang Calhoun was not afraid of Nicholas Biddle.<sup>1</sup> No sooner was the session ended than Jackson prepared to strike the blow which had long been meditated. The bank was doomed, but it suited his purposes to wait until the last moment before giving any intimation of the matter. As Secretary McLane was favorable to the bank, opportunity was made of a vacancy to promote him to the secretaryship of state. To the Treasury was assigned William J. Duane, son of the vitriolic editor of the *Aurora* which had been the favorite organ of Jefferson. Duane accepted the post with some reluctance and agreed that if the deposits

<sup>1</sup>The report that Jackson threatened to hang Calhoun, in the sense that personal violence was intended, is apocryphal. Jackson's idea was to have Calhoun convicted of treason.

were to be removed, he would either sign the order or resign to permit some more accommodating officer to perform the task. In fact, he does not seem to have believed that such a thing would be attempted. It was, however, already determined on.<sup>1</sup> Jackson always prepared his policies in consultation with the members of his "Kitchen Cabinet" before conferring with his official advisers. He consulted with Blair, editor of the *Globe*, who was favorable to the move; Amos P. Kendall, who was at first doubtful; and Major Lewis, one of his secretaries, who was willing to do anything his chief ordered. Kendall was sent on a secret mission to sound the state banks of the country on the matter of accepting the national deposits. Jackson had supposed they would jump at the opportunity but the very reverse was the case. Bankers are proverbially cautious and those officers who were approached first, being those of the soundest institutions, were chary about the matter since heavy security was desired, and the fact that the National Bank was to be attacked in so extraordinary a manner, was not a good augury for the business future of the country. Kendall did succeed in making some arrangements, which in the end proved

<sup>1</sup> Schouler, "History of the United States."



most unsatisfactory, but they were sufficient for Jackson's purposes. Returning suddenly and unexpectedly from an Eastern tour the President found to his dismay that although Duane had twice been sounded by a member of his "Kitchen Cabinet" he was averse to removing the deposits. Jackson who ill-brooked opposition at any time was furious and ordered his Secretary to sign the order or resign, as he had promised. Duane, who was enraged, both because he thought the policy bad and because he found all the business of his department was being conducted in a closet without his knowledge, declared that he had been badly treated, that he was absolved from his promise, and refused to do either. That settled Duane's position at once. He was summarily dismissed, Attorney-General Taney was made Secretary of the Treasury and the order was promptly signed. Benton was in Virginia at this time, ignorant of the action taken, but he endorsed it fully.

"I felt an emotion of the moral sublime at beholding such an instance of civic heroism," said he. "Here was a president, not bred up in the political profession, taking a great step on his own responsibility from which many of his adversaries shrunk."

That the order made a sensation can well be imagined and the officers of the bank were filled with dismay. Its condition was now really worse than they dared admit and they were struck in a vital part. Actually there was no removal of money in the vaults but the receipts as they came in were deposited in the state banks and all orders on the treasury were cashed at the National Bank so that the deposits rapidly disappeared. Well had it been at this time if Biddle and his directors had shown a spirit of humility. On the contrary they were angered by the action of the President and entered upon a course which made their complete ruin all the more certain. Biddle drew up a letter in which "Andrew Jackson," as he was styled without reference to his title, was denounced for issuing "a pretended order" removing the deposits, the whole being couched in a witty and bitterly sarcastic vein calculated to impress the ignorant reader with the fact that there had been no legal action in the premises. After that there was no rest for the bank so long as Jackson or one of his partisans was in power. The contest for recharter was renewed with more bitterness than ever, but with no success. Jackson again showed his consummate leadership by the fact that not even a majority could

be mustered in Congress for the bank, in spite of the fact that it was supposed to have used a large corruption fund.

When Congress reassembled Jackson reported his action and justified it, recommending that the \$7,000,000 of stock held by the government be sold. That trouble was at hand was evident from the fact that the bank had not paid some national bonds when due though supposedly it had plenty of federal money and a large surplus. Instead it had secured from the holders an extension, and for this suspicious circumstance the bank gave a reason which satisfied its friends only.

The bank men in Congress were furious, particularly Clay and Calhoun, who had their own private grievances against Jackson as well as their belief in the utility of the institution. The triumvirate which had been broken by the nullification affair was now reorganized, and the fight on Jackson was renewed with enthusiasm, bitterness and not very much wisdom. These giants could never satisfactorily account for Jackson's popularity and success. The very last concession they would make was that he had larger abilities or greater political wisdom than any one of them. It is always humiliating to be defeated by one who is considered in

every way an inferior and Jackson was not at all particular about the feelings of his enemies. It is perhaps correct to say that Jackson went to intolerable lengths in his animosities and that he was often malicious; but as a rule he was forced into his attitudes and those who wished to escape his wrath should not have been so willing and even anxious to get in its path.

On this occasion (the session of 1832-3) Clay counted up his followers in the Senate and found a good majority. As there seemed to be no way in which the President could be compelled to undo what he had done the only weapon left was censure. Jackson must be made odious to the public. For this purpose Clay introduced a resolution of censure on the President for his action in removing the deposits. This was utterly unprecedented and of course made "Old Hickory" furious. The flood-gates of oratory were opened again and in the course of a very extended debate the whole subject of the administration and its financial policy was threshed over. The foes of Jackson made much of the fact that there had been a sudden and very serious decline in business prosperity in the last few months and attributed it directly to the action of the President. The defenders of the administra-

tion were put on the defensive in this respect for the "hard times" were undeniable.

Benton who made above thirty speeches in this debate insisted that the "hard times" were artificial and had been deliberately brought about by the bank to show its power. In this view he may have had some slight justification but there was none for the lengths to which he carried the argument. No one free from partisan prejudice could deny that distress was to some extent the result of the President's action. It is manifest that no bank could stand such a sudden constriction of its resources without disaster. During the previous contest, as has already been noted, the institution had very greatly extended its credits and it is said that some sixty members of Congress were borrowers or were retained as counsel. When the blow fell the bank could do nothing but call in its loans as they matured. In many cases the borrowers were unable to pay promptly and this brought about a great disturbance of business. Although the state banks had the money that might have been in the National Bank and were urged by the Secretary to be liberal in discounts, especially to merchants in foreign trade, such readjustments of credit are not easily made. While the condition of

the country at no time bordered on panic there was great restriction in business and no little distress.

The net result of the winter's campaign against Jackson was the passage of the resolution of censure by the Senate, to which the President replied in a vigorous paper declaring that the action of that body was illegal and void, and defending himself with as much dignity as possible from the aspersions upon his character. Thereupon the Senate passed another resolution to the effect that Jackson's reply was improper and out of place.

The effect of the resolution was far from being what the triumvirate had expected. Once more the people sided with Jackson, because they saw in this plan to humiliate him not an attempt to maintain national dignity, but an effort of disappointed statesmen to get even with a successful rival. Benton at once announced his intention to work for an expunging resolution, and he finally succeeded. In fact, had the friends of the bank kept quiet Jackson would have come out of the affair with little credit, since there appeared to be nothing that justified his action in withdrawing the deposits; certainly there was no occasion for so radical a measure. It was another of those cases in which

Jackson was happier in the wrath of his friends than in the value of his own acts.

Moreover a curious situation now developed. Webster prepared a bill which extended the charter of the bank for six years and took from it the exclusive monopoly it had so long enjoyed; while it was arranged that the national deposits should be restored gradually so as not to embarrass the state bank depositories. Benton was not violently opposed to this plan. The measure was agreeable to a majority in both Houses and there is reason to think that Jackson would have signed it if the resolution of censure had not been passed. Most unexpectedly neither Clay nor Calhoun would support the measure, though it was understood to have the approval of the directors of the bank, who thought it much better to take half a loaf than no bread. Clay still asked for twenty years and Calhoun favored twelve. In this situation no legislation was possible. Some of the old enemies of the bank voted for Webster's motion, while most of its old friends were against the measure. Benton here appeared as a quasi-champion of the bank and Clay as its bitterest foe, and after this there never was a chance of any legislation whatever in its favor. The triumvirate succeeded, however, in

defeating the confirmation of Jackson's nominees for bank directors as provided by its charter and of Taney for Secretary of the Treasury.

The notice Benton had immediately given that he would move for an expunging of the resolution of censure against the President was no idle threat. It was introduced regularly at every session and was made the basis of many of his speeches in which he again and again went over the whole history of the bank and its crimes until it is no wonder that his colleagues were tired of the subject and devoutly wished he would drop it. In his way he was as persistent as Jackson, and so it came to pass that in the last months of that President's administration, after the Senate had so changed its membership as to contain an administration majority, the resolution expunging the original resolution of censure was passed by a vote of twenty-four to nineteen. This was one of the sweetest triumphs of Benton's life. It was in a sense mere *brutum fulmen*, for the original resolution was one in which a simple opinion had been expressed. It had no official significance, but it rankled in Jackson's breast and Benton was set on righting the injury. The night on which this deed was accomplished was one of the most famous in the history of the Senate. In vain



did the giants of the triumvirate protest against expunging. They had none of that masterful air of a few years previous, when they were able to control the Senate. They now took lofty ground in justifying their position, and moved not a whit. By this time the people had so far vindicated Jackson once more as to elect as his successor Van Buren, whom he had personally singled out for the honor.

Benton had made up his mind that the resolution should pass on that day (January 16, 1837), no matter what the consequences, and he held his followers in leash so that they could not escape even had they wished. Aware that human nature is very weak and prone to err when not properly sustained by food and drink, he had a committee-room close at hand well-stocked with hams, turkeys, rounds of beef, pickles, wine, coffee and everything that could tempt the appetite, so that his men should not stray away. The triumvirate had imagined that it was possible to postpone action, but now that they were at bay they made their valedictories on the subject, and others who saw that the end was near, refused longer to carry on the contest. When the resolution passed, Benton moved to carry it into immediate execution, which was

accordingly done. The secretary of the Senate opened the record and drew a black border around the offending resolution and across its face wrote the words, "Expunged by order of the Senate this 16th day of January, 1837."<sup>1</sup> At this announcement the galleries broke out into hisses. There had been so much excitement over the matter, and some of the speeches of the evening had been so bitter that many of Benton's friends believed he was about to be assaulted by roughs in the gallery whom they considered partisans of the bank. Some of these friends left the room and brought in pistols, while Mrs. Benton, who feared that her husband was to be assassinated, had come into the Senate chamber, resolved to suffer the same fate if necessary. There is no good reason to believe that an assault was intended, certainly it was not inspired by any one in a position of authority; but in those days the mob had begun to feel its power, a state of things for which Jackson was in no small measure responsible, and every precaution was taken to protect Benton. The latter had no fear, and when the presiding officer gave the order to have the galleries cleared he interfered and said with some show of bravado :

<sup>1</sup> Devens, "Our First Century."

“I hope the galleries will not be cleared, as many innocent persons will be excluded, who have been guilty of no violation of order. Let the ruffians who alone have made this disturbance be punished. Let them be apprehended. I hope the sergeant-at-arms will be directed to enter the gallery and seize the ruffians, ascertaining who they are in the best way he can. Let him apprehend them and bring them to the bar of the Senate. Let him seize the bank ruffians. I hope they will not now be permitted to insult the Senate as they did when it was under the power of the Bank of the United States, when ruffians, with arms upon them, insulted us with impunity. Let them be taken and brought to the bar of the Senate. Here is one just above me, that may be easily identified, one of the bank ruffians !”

The sergeant-at-arms went to the gallery, seized the ringleader and brought him to the bar, at which his colleagues left the gallery in haste. The man was allowed to go after vainly pleading for a chance to explain. This ended the disturbances, and the solemnities of the occasion were not again interfered with.

Thus the long contest was closed and Jackson showed his appreciation of the service by inviting

all the expungers and their wives to a dinner where Benton took the post of honor, since the President was too weak to attend ; and a merry time was had toasting Jackson and the Jacksonians.<sup>1</sup>

Meantime the bank recharter question died. In the Whig administration of 1841-5, under the leadership of Clay, two bank bills were passed and both were vetoed by Tyler. The bank secured a Pennsylvania charter and soon went into insolvency. Our present national banks established during the Civil War have no likeness whatever to the two institutions which were so long factors in national politics. They more nearly represent in their actual business relations the state banks of the Jacksonian period, though the latter had no federal supervision and were frequently unsound.

His contest in behalf of the expunging resolution was Benton's last important personal service to

<sup>1</sup> During the angry debates over censure, Jackson had the Benton bullet, received in the Tennessee brawl, extracted from his shoulder. There is some doubt whether Jesse or Thomas Benton fired the shot. Jackson's latest biographer states that it was Thomas and that Jackson offered him the bullet as a souvenir, which was declined. Other biographers affirm that it was Jesse. Thomas says nothing about it, and it is probable that in the *mélée* no one knew certainly who fired the shot.

Jackson, and it practically concluded a political alliance that is one of the strangest in our history. It is impossible to overestimate the service which Benton rendered his chief. Jackson's defects were so many and so radical that unless he had been sustained by strong men he must necessarily have suffered in popular estimation and might never have been re-elected. It was his good fortune to have at his right hand a man who served him with a devotion and an unselfishness which have seldom been equaled. Benton owed nothing to Jackson for his election or continuance in office at any time. He never asked a personal favor of him, refused many honors which were offered him, and was never even a member of his "Kitchen Cabinet." Moreover at a time when Jackson was surrounded by a set of sycophants and office-seekers, men who crooked the pregnant hinges of the knees that thrift should follow their fawning, and who succeeded admirably in filling their pockets with ill-gotten gains, Benton had clean hands. In all this saturnalia of political jobbery and robbery of the public, he took no part and never gained a penny.

In the partnership the advantage was all Jackson's except what inhered to Benton in his consciousness of duty done. Benton was no prude and

did not set himself up to be better than the rest of mankind. He liked politics but he played the game in a large way and would not be turned from a chosen course by any considerations. In one of the last panegyrics which Benton dedicated to Jackson, his final speech on the expunging resolution, the senator from Missouri said :

“Great is the confidence which he has always reposed in the discernment and equity of the American people. I have been accustomed to see him for many years, and under many discouraging trials; but never saw him doubt, for an instant, the ultimate support of the people. It was my privilege to see him often, and during the most gloomy period of the panic conspiracy, when the whole earth seemed to be in commotion against him, and when many friends were faltering, and stout hearts were quailing before the raging storm which bank machination and senatorial denunciation had conjured up to overwhelm him. I saw him in the darkest moments of this gloomy period; and never did I see his confidence in the ultimate support of his fellow-citizens forsake him for an instant. He always said the people would stand by those who stand by them; and nobly have they justified that confidence! That verdict, the voice

of millions, which now demands the expurgation of that sentence, which the Senate and the bank then pronounced upon him, is the magnificent response of the people's hearts to the implicit confidence which he then reposed in them. But it was not in the people only that he had confidence; there was another, and a far higher Power, to which he constantly looked to save the country and its defenders, from every danger; and signal events prove that he did not look to that at high Power in vain."

Although long in the minority in the Senate, Benton always fought manfully and doggedly. A visitor at this period refers to him as a "gnarled oak." It hardly seems a happy simile, though it must have had some application in the fact that he stood unbending in the storm of opposition to Jackson. Others called him a "wild buffalo." A man of less stamina would have succumbed: one of less courage and devotion would have abandoned the contest many times. Benton did not love a fight for its own sake but he never avoided one, and when once engaged in it he followed as far as possible the advice of Polonius.

With his increasing influence and power as his faction got into control he lost none of his vanity,

which after all was of a very harmless sort. He seemed to feel the weight of the country on his shoulders and never underestimated his abilities in any direction. He sat in the Senate during every hour of the session, watching every movement and nagging the opposition in a way that was not always dignified or pleasant. Still that was an accepted part of the proceedings at the time and was indulged in by nearly all of the leaders on both sides.

Benton's tendency to talk on all occasions increased as he felt himself to be the mouthpiece of the administration and as has been said he was not always a pleasing speaker. He was dogmatic, imperious and so devoted to wild western manners, it is related, that he usually spoke to empty galleries and often to empty seats in the chamber.<sup>1</sup> This did not discomfit him in the least. He spoke for those outside the Senate though he often criticised others for doing the same thing. He contributed to the *Globe* with a trenchant pen and inspired Blair in much that the latter wrote. His energy knew no bounds and to this and the fact that he was steadfast may be attributed much of the success he achieved, for he was a sound rather than a talented

<sup>1</sup>"Reminiscences" of Ben Perley Poore.



man. He was able to accomplish so much more than many of his more brilliant contemporaries because he allowed nothing to interfere with his work, and his industry received its reward.

## CHAPTER VIII

### "OLD BULLION"

If in these years Benton's sole task had been to kill the National Bank the achievement would have been of little credit to him. His main purpose was to establish gold and silver as the standards of value in the nation. This he did but not until the country had passed through fiery trials. State banks were not all sound but they managed for a time to thrive for the reason that business, which had been dull, revived after the National Bank had lost the deposits. It was evident to Benton that the situation was far from satisfactory and that something must be done to improve the currency. It is much to his honor and greatly also to the credit of the many leaders who opposed the President's bank policy that some remedial legislation was enacted. Benton had always opposed any sort of national paper currency and believed that coin only should be used, asserting indeed that it alone was constitutional money.

Banking at this time was scarcely a science

except with a few of the larger institutions. In fairness to the National Bank, in spite of political attacks upon it, it should be said that it well maintained its credit through most of its career. It is true that in the early management there had been looseness which required a new administration, but the system was now so excellent that it was called the Gibraltar of American credit. The banks of New England, New York and Pennsylvania as a rule maintained specie payments except in times of great distress. But as one moved South and West the bills of state banks were accepted only according to a depreciated scale. The merchant found great difficulty in doing business when there were in circulation so many kinds of bills of such varying value and in addition such large numbers of counterfeits. The most indispensable book in any business house was the "Counterfeit Detector" with a table giving the scale of exchange at which bills were received in various places.

Others were equally affected. The farmer who sold his grain had to scrutinize with the greatest care the notes offered him and not infrequently sustained heavy losses. The worst sufferer of all was the wage-earner who worked for an unscrupulous employer. The latter would often purchase

depreciated notes and pay his hands in these at face value, any refusal to accept them being met with dismissal. One of the largest of American banking houses was established by a German portrait painter who roamed from one section of the country to another and found in buying and selling bank notes a greater profit than in painting pictures.

Bad as was the condition of the currency at this time there was no denying the fact that it had been a great deal worse during those years when there had been no National Bank. Even Madison had been obliged to admit that fact and those strict constructionist Democrats who had looked upon Hamilton's first bank as a monster of iniquity were compelled to permit the establishment of a second. If the partisans of the bank had been more honest, more adroit and had seemed to have less personal interest in its fortunes, the result would have been better for the recharter movement. Clay and Webster were correct in pointing out the great advantages that had accrued through its operations. They believed that the country would never be able to get along without it and doubted whether any alternative could be supplied sufficient for the public needs. It was generally agreed that it

would be a good thing if the nation were on a specie basis, but to most business men the obstacles seemed insurmountable.

Benton appears to have missed the essential idea that, in business, credit is as important as money, and that under proper restrictions credit money is absolutely essential to prosperity. He did not understand that when coin formed so small a part of the money supply of the nation it would be a difficult task to get it into circulation. Gresham's law that bad money drives out good had been tested in this country. Coin and the best notes were hoarded while every one got rid of depreciated or doubtful notes or bad coin at the first opportunity. At this time we had scarcely any gold in the country because the standard of fifteen to one established by Jefferson had proven to be an incorrect ratio. The true ratio was less than sixteen to one and there it long remained. To get gold into circulation Benton secured the passage of laws fixing the ratio at sixteen to one, though he preferred the exact fraction. A branch mint was established at New Orleans and through his efforts gold coins were restored to the currency of the country. Benton's "mint drops," as they were called, were very popular. They aided Jackson in the fall elections and

were the first gold coins which many of the people had ever seen. Even the ardent friends of the bank could not fail to see that gold was the best money, if enough of it could be secured, and in a short time the country did have a large amount of it in circulation, since it came back from Europe under the new ratio which overvalued it.

Being scientifically incorrect one of the results of the change of ratio was to send abroad some of the silver, which alarmed the administration. In its efforts to bring silver into use again it refused deposits to banks which emitted notes of a smaller denomination than five dollars, though it could not prevent a large number of these from being issued by other banks. Coin was popular and but for the crash that soon came the country might have passed over to a specie basis sooner than even Benton expected.

The measure which was more effectual than all others in bringing coin into common use was the celebrated specie circular which required that public lands should be paid for in hard money. This was a radical step and though eventually it would have been a most necessary one, it came at a rather inopportune time as was soon manifested. The necessity for this order lay in the fact that land sales

were now amounting to about forty millions a year, and, under the policy by which state bank notes were accepted in payment, there had been a great deal of speculation. Banks were springing up all over the country; the earlier total of five hundred was soon doubled. There was a craze for this sort of enterprise and even if the banks had been established on a sound basis there was no need for so many. As a matter of fact many of them were the flimsiest sort of financial structures, erected under loose general laws or charters granted by too accommodating legislatures. It seemed easy to print money and get rich and for a time there ensued a fictitious prosperity.

Under an act of Congress the Secretary of the Treasury was given discretionary power in receiving the notes of banks for public lands, but up to this time he had never interfered in the matter. So long as the notes were actually redeemable in specie little damage was done, but with many banks this was an uncertain quantity, and they were liable to break under any unusual stress. The fact that such an enormous business was done in purchasing lands with notes bought at a discount showed how hollow was the pretense of the system of specie payments which the government maintained. Still the evil was one that was

not so great until the craze for new banks broke out and the people engaged in land speculation. Much of this paper was in fact irredeemable and when the land sales amounted to five millions a month it was evident that there was danger lest the lands would be lost to the government, owing to the prospect of its being unable to redeem much of the currency paid for them. Benton endeavored to secure the passage of a law requiring coin to be used in payment for lands. This was a total failure partly because the people were still wild over paper money and partly, as Benton asserted, because so many members were actively engaged in land speculation on their own account.

In 1836 he again proposed to the President that specie alone be accepted in payment for land and though "Old Hickory" was not a great financier he endorsed the plan. He discovered that his cabinet was strongly opposed to the measure so he called them in session, and had Benton in an ante-room where he wrote out the executive order which was signed at once to the disgust of the members of the cabinet, the wrath of land speculators and the distress of many honest purchasers. In the end it proved a salutary measure. As it was, the injury had been so great that much of the currency re-



ceived from the sales turned out to be absolutely worthless.

The financial measures of Benton, for they were his and his almost alone, proved to have more lasting value than any other legislation of the time. It is true that if the bank had been rechartered we might have had no panic of 1837 but that is one of those hypothetical statements made by politicians for political effect, the truth of which can well be doubted. Even the bank might have gone down and certainly would have done so had it not mended its ways. It is also quite unlikely, even if it had remained sound, that the prosperity of the country could have continued without the periodical depression. We have had panics in this country about every twenty years with a regularity that cannot be laid entirely at the door of legislation, though they may have been to some extent induced by it. The truth is that there is in the optimistic, reckless American spirit a tendency to speculation that cannot be curbed, no matter how fair the warning or how grave the former experience.

It was certain that we could not indefinitely continue on a paper basis and the fact that Benton was the first to foresee the need of coin and to fight until he attained success stamps him as one of the

great constructive statesmen of the age. In this work he had the support of some of the friends of the bank, but Clay was adamant to the last, opposing not only the new standard but the establishment of branch mints. It is greatly to be regretted that so enlightened a statesman as Clay, one so potential for good in the country, should at various times have allowed personal spleen or misguided judgment to stand in the way of progress.

Benton, however, was not to escape without much censure for his acts. As coin came into circulation the poorer classes were benefited, but there were many who found their profits diminished by the process and there were others who saw in the measure a fatal blow at the bank. Benton was dubbed “Old Bullion” and given other titles in derision which finally came to be badges of honor. By his new currency law and the executive order the Democratic party was eventually divided into two factions, the “Hards” and the “Softs,” and though the distinction was at first on a question of finance it finally came to have local applications quite distinct from the currency.

Directly and indirectly it is clear that Jackson’s war on the bank brought much disaster, although it was practically not anything like as great as

was attributed to his action; and it can be confidently asserted that we should not have escaped some set-backs if Jackson had been the most ardent supporter of the institution which it was his chief delight to attack. Looking back over the nearly seventy years which have elapsed since that time we can see that whatever errors may be attributed to the administration the establishment of the specie standard is one of the most beneficent in our history.

The specie standard is the most enduring monument to Benton. It cannot of course be claimed for him that he is responsible for the legislation of recent years, but it can truthfully be said that without the legislation which he secured our present standard might never have been established, or would have been attained with greater difficulty. To the pioneer always belongs the credit and what others might have done is of less consequence than the fact that Benton actually did put coin into general circulation where formerly there was only paper, much of which was depreciable and some of it valueless.

It would seem as if some happy genius had presided over the political destinies of Andrew Jackson. His enemies said that he had good luck and

certainly it would seem more than a mere coincidence that he had no sooner left the capital after installing his successor and presenting him with his cabinet than the greatest financial crisis in our history up to that time confronted the country. Already there had been mutterings of the storm, but now it broke in all its fury and conditions were deplorable. Banks suspended specie payments, many went into bankruptcy, business men failed, industry of every sort contracted; there was distress from one end of the country to the other and the wail that arose was well-nigh unanimous. The government lost millions in the state bank depositories which failed and this was the hardest blow at Benton's policy.

As Jackson had received the benefit of prosperity, whether responsible for it or not, the administration now had to suffer for evil times and was held guilty of all that had occurred. Van Buren had been a staunch Jackson man so that he could not escape censure even if he had so desired. No administration ever started out under more unfavorable circumstances. The Whigs had no difficulty in indicting the administration and the Democratic party in general, and laid the blame to the following causes: Failure to recharter the bank; removal

of the deposits; the specie circular; maladministration of financial affairs; deposit of money in banks which failed; the tariff compromise; defalcation of public officials.

There is no doubt that these were contributing causes but it would be difficult to prove that they were the only factors, or that these measures were all of them vicious in all of their workings. It was a difficult task for the supporters of the administration to explain the situation. They could not do so with general satisfaction. Nothing excuses "hard times." Benton, however, went manfully to the task, feeling his own conscience pretty clear. In February when the storm was seen by him to be impending he knew that something must be done and for the purpose invited the president-elect, then vice-president, into a committee room to discuss the matter with him. As Benton was really responsible for most of the financial legislation of the Jackson administration it was natural that he should desire to give what aid he could and he expected to be well received. On the contrary as soon as the subject was opened Van Buren remarked :

"Your friends think you are a little exalted in the head on the subject."

This statement angered Benton and he said no

more but left the room, muttering to himself, “ You will soon feel the thunderbolt.” Later he regretted his exhibition of temper but it is doubtful if he could have had much influence with Van Buren in any event. This is a side-light on Benton’s character and exhibits the temper of the times. Business was at that time moving under fair skies and few looked for stormy weather.<sup>1</sup>

After the panic began Benton made many speeches in the Senate. He referred to the charges against the Democratic party and answered them seriatim. He attacked the bank as the Red Harlot and asserted that it and other banks had purposely brought on the crisis to hurt the administration. This was no new idea of his. He had thought the same thing a few years before and nothing in Benton’s career is quite so unsatisfactory as this opinion which he so often reiterated. Banks do not commit suicide. It is possible that at times the Bank of the United States did go outside its normal sphere of activity to bring pressure to bear on politics, and even may have done a good deal that is discreditable ; but to blame it and the other banks for bringing on a crisis to ruin the government for political reasons and necessarily ruin themselves is not

<sup>1</sup> Benton’s “Thirty Years’ View.”

logical and shows how prejudiced Benton had become against the institution which he had fought so long. On the other hand it cannot be said that the failure to recharter the bank was alone or even largely responsible for its own failure or the panic which ensued, though this act did something to disturb business conditions.

As to the removal of the deposits the only direct influence of that policy in bringing about the panic was in the rearrangement of business which ensued, since the money was still available for public use. As a matter of fact in the end it did not advantage these banks, for they failed almost without exception, and very little was ever recovered by the government. If the National Bank had retained the deposits it might have weathered the storm, but the management had now become so reckless that it is not safe to say the country would have been better off in the end.

The bitterest attack was on the specie circular. It is true that this circular had made necessary the use of an immense amount of specie, but according to Benton, under the operation of his own legislation, the fund had increased in a few years from twenty millions to one hundred millions. It had acquainted the people with hard money. Depre-

ciated bank notes were no longer the principal medium of exchange. The worst that can be said of this order is that it was premature. The same results might have been attained gradually, but that it was a proper principle is evidenced by the fact that it survived until the Civil War.

Of the defalcation of many of Jackson's officials there is no doubt whatever and no defense. At no previous time had the public service been so disgracefully debauched, but this scandal had nothing to do with the panic. Benton asserted with truth that much of the misery of the time was due to the fictitious prosperity that had come from the sudden expansion of paper currency. There were now in the country a thousand banks which issued currency, and few of them had anything like the proper reserve in coin,—many of them had not proper assets of any kind. The people had gone wild in speculation and had run deeply into debt. Merchants had imported enormous amounts of foreign goods in anticipation of good times so that when the banks suspended, May 10th, the whole fabric went to the ground at once. And with it went for the time being the fortunes of the Democratic party.

Benton did his best in this crisis. He supported



the administration and made many speeches. In spite of distress, in spite of the fact that at the next election the administration would lose the House, no change was made, except through the establishment of the independent treasury system by which the government was completely divorced from banks of any sort. The country had gone over completely to a specie basis. This was the triumph of Benton's policy. For this he had contended for nearly twenty years, and even if it be granted that he had in some cases acted too precipitately and taken positions that were too radical, it is certain that the object was worthy of great sacrifice.

These were not altogether pleasant days for the great Missourian, though he fared better than some members of his party. Since he was known as the father of the system of specie payments and was called a "gold bug," the blame of much of the distress was laid upon his shoulders. He was now dubbed "Old Humbug," and lampooned bitterly. All sorts of imitation money were issued on which the rude pictures sought principally to assail the Democratic party and Benton in particular. Many of these were sent him accompanied by insulting letters, and they seem to have moved him to more or less anger; but he never for a moment wavered

in his belief that he had acted properly in all legislative matters, laying the hard times at the door of the bank, the politicians and, in some measure, to the land surplus bill which he had bitterly opposed.

Benton's championship of cheap lands for the settler brought him into conflict constantly with those congressmen who opposed the motion to distribute among the states the surplus from sales. Here he came into further antagonism with Clay. The elections of 1836 were approaching and the Whig party was in a state of discouragement. Clay was not a candidate, and had announced that he never would be again, which was a useless and untrue declaration since he thrice more was tempted. The compromise tariff of 1833 settled that subject for the present, since to have disturbed it would have once more aroused the sleeping lion in Calhoun and the nullifiers. Internal improvements had been abandoned even by Clay. The bank charter could not be extended except under circumstances which seemed unlikely to exist. The Whigs had fixed on no candidate, which was singular, since several states had favorite sons; but no attempt was made to consolidate in favor of any one, the intention being to await the result of the

elections. Clay considered that he ought to perform a service for the party, and at the same time execute a long cherished plan. The sales of public lands had increased so rapidly that after the debt was paid the surplus promised to be so great that something must be done with the money. Clay, as we have seen, secured the passage in 1833 of a law distributing the surplus from land sales, as a part of his tariff compromise scheme. The states desired the money and it was natural they should consider that it belonged to them since it was an asset fast disappearing. If the money were not needed by the government what could be more proper than to give it back to the people?

There was much dissension over this bill and its passage was delayed until nearly the last hours of the session of 1833. Before this time it had not been customary to pass such important measures so near the end of the session, since the President was accustomed to consider them well and seek the advice of his cabinet. Jackson was opposed to the measure which was brought to him in the room at the capitol used by him when he signed appropriation bills now for the first time delayed in passage. Benton called on the President and they counseled together over the bill. The matter had been

threshed out so thoroughly in Congress that that body was disposed to stand by its action as Jackson well knew. He hesitated to veto the bill at once for fear it would be passed over his head. He asked Benton to look over the Senate and see how the members stood. When the latter returned he advised that there was danger for which reason Jackson took no action and thus the bill fell by the first “pocket veto” in our history.

At the next session Clay in high dudgeon attacked the President for his course, and Benton as usual defended Jackson, pointing out that the Constitution evidently intended that the President should have ten days in which to consider a bill. The remedy which Congress had at hand, he said, was to pass the bill in time. This was sound sense but it has never become a fixed principle of action and many measures have suffered the same fate because of the tendency to delay so much important legislation until the closing hours of the session. Clay made a great speech on the veto and its abuses in which he paid his compliments to Jackson and Benton and that was all that came of the incident.

In every succeeding session some such plan for the distribution of the surplus was proposed but

Benton opposed it to the last. In 1836 just before the presidential election Clay came to the front once more with a surplus distribution bill. Originally it was a deliberate proposal for disposing of all the surplus in the treasury exceeding five millions of dollars, which was considered a sufficient working capital. In spite of Benton's resistance the measure passed and went to the House where it met with unexpected opposition. There were members in plenty anxious for the money, but it was hard for many of them to convince themselves that the payment would be constitutional. It was in derogation of so much they had striven for in the past that a majority could not be mustered for the bill. At this juncture a measure dealing with the regulation of the public moneys in the state banks was being discussed in Congress and some one conceived the notion that the two might be consolidated in a way that would salve the consciences of the strict constructionists. The money as received was deposited in the state banks and now it was proposed that the surplus be "deposited" with the states according to their Congressional representation. On its face this meant that the Federal government might call for the money whenever it pleased. As a matter of fact

no such call was ever contemplated even by those who devised the trick to save themselves from censure. When the bill in this shape came back to the Senate, Benton attacked it furiously. He seems to have been the one sane man in finance in this entire period and he explained in advance exactly what was likely to happen. But the spirit of cupidity had been aroused and, with plausible reasons for every one, the bill passed, Benton mustering in opposition only a few votes besides his own. Jackson signed the measure and this is said to have been his only important political act which he afterward regretted. It is likely the bill would have been passed over his head in any event but that consideration probably did not influence Jackson so much as his fear that a veto might unfavorably affect the candidacy of Van Buren. This is one of the occasions when he did not consult Benton, who afterward thought that the President might have been induced to veto the measure if he had asked the advice which some of his nearest friends were willing to give.

The money was to be paid in four quarterly instalments. The first was paid in specie, the second with difficulty in lawful money, the third in depreciated bank paper and the fourth was never

paid at all ; for by this time the panic had come and the government so far from having any surplus faced a deficit. Under the circumstances one might suppose that the states would have been satisfied with the largess of \$29,000,000, but on the contrary, and in spite of hard times, they demanded the fourth instalment as a right, making desperate efforts to compel its payment though without success. To this day that sum stands on the books of the Federal government against the states ; legally it is a claim but it is of course worthless.

The use made of the money shows how absurd and vicious was the law and fully confirmed Benton in all he had said. Some of the states divided the money *pro rata* among the inhabitants, which meant nothing more or less than putting it into immediate circulation, as the amount *per capita* was very small. Others gave the money to the counties which employed it more or less extravagantly either in new enterprises or in reducing taxation. Still others used it as a nucleus of an immense fund for internal improvements,—for building railways, canals and the like, most of which were started on the assumption that the distribution was to continue for many years. When the collapse

came some of the states found themselves with enormous debts and no resources. Probably there has never been expended in this country a similar sum of money for which there was so little return. It was a bad principle and it worked ill for the reason that people seldom appreciate what comes to them too easily. Like the money the gambler wins, it is soon spent and often most unwisely.

Benton as Chairman of the Military Committee of the Senate had asked that this large sum be devoted to fortifications. It had been estimated that one hundred millions could be expended in this manner with worthy results. Benton had also wished the price of lands reduced to the settler and brought forward for the first time, it seems, a homestead law by which any man or woman might obtain one hundred and sixty acres of the public domain by living on it for five years and investing a certain amount of labor and money in the improvement of it. This was so wild a scheme that, with his insistence on the use of gold for currency, his killing of the bank, his attacks upon all kinds of paper money and his proposal now to give away land, many considered Benton a fit candidate for a lunatic asylum. Yet every one of these things in time came to pass and it may be said truly that the



gift of public lands to the industrious poor of this country has had more to do with our rapid national development than any other single policy which has been adopted. After the Civil War hundreds of thousands of young men rushed into the West to take up the new lands and became the backbone of that section. Benton was the father of the cheap land system, and it is curious that Clay almost invariably opposed him. Clay felt that it was better to keep up the price and distribute the surplus while Benton truly believed that wealth is largest in the country which has the greatest number of prosperous inhabitants.

During the summer of 1837 he failed to make his customary tour of Missouri on the stump because his aged mother was very ill and he could not be persuaded to leave her bedside ; but he wrote many long letters to his constituents in which he explained his position. In these months his name was suggested in various parts of the country for the presidency or the vice-presidency and he received many invitations to complimentary public dinners at Cincinnati, Louisville and elsewhere. All these he declined. He had never accepted such kindnesses but once or twice and then only at his home. To Tammany Hall which offered him a

dinner and suggested the vice-presidency he wrote that he had no ambitions in either direction and that he favored the renomination and re-election of Van Buren.<sup>1</sup>

He was shrewd enough, however, to see that the fortunes of his party were waning. When Tennessee, against the warning of "Old Hickory," gave an overwhelming majority to the Whig ticket, almost breaking Jackson's heart, it brought home to Benton a consciousness that the administration, even if as able and pure as he believed, was not likely to retain a hold on the people until the restoration of prosperity. This would return slowly. Although the Eastern banks as a rule resumed specie payments within a year, the disturbance of business had been so great that the country at large, which continued to hurl anathemas at Van Buren, recovered very gradually. It was solemnly charged that hemstitched linen dish-cloths were used at the White House in a time of great public distress. Van Buren failed to get his second term; the prize which Clay had so dearly longed for was snatched from him by a parliamentary trick at the Whig Convention, and Harrison was nominated and triumphantly elected.

<sup>1</sup> Niles' Register.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE OREGON QUESTION

THERE was much of interest during the administration of Tyler, who followed Harrison in the White House upon the President's early death, in which Benton bore a conspicuous part. Webster who had remained in the cabinet to complete the treaty with Lord Ashburton for the adjustment of several accumulated differences with Great Britain, and was unceremoniously relieved of his place as soon as he had performed that task, was striving to adjust all the various unsettled difficulties between the two governments. When Lord Ashburton came to this country on a special mission it was felt that no one except Webster was equal to the work in hand but, according to the view of Benton, the Massachusetts statesman was clay in the potter's hand.

We had several grievances and Great Britain only one. The Canadian boundary along the Maine frontier, according to the British view, should be set back to give a tolerably direct road to Halifax. With that fine disregard of geography with which treaties dealing with unknown territory are made,

it so happened that we gained more by the actual survey than was expected and really more than was just to Canada. Our strategic position, however, was excellent and a wiser diplomatist than Webster would have used this advantage in trade. For instance, we desired a definition of the Oregon boundary line but Great Britain refused to take the matter up at the time, preferring to trust to some accident in the future. This was a mistake which Benton perceived. Although he was not one of the extremists, he was enough of a public man to know that this was the time for a settlement of a question which was to be entirely omitted from the treaty. We had a quarrel induced by an attack upon our sovereignty during the Fenian troubles in Canada, culminating in the affair in which the *Caroline* was seized, fired and set adrift to sweep over Niagara Falls. This question Great Britain refused to consider. We had a claim, which was small in Webster's eyes, for the value of slaves shipwrecked on British islands and set free. Benton resented this view, maintaining that they should not have been liberated ; they did not reach free soil in any normal way. He saw that if such a precedent were established there would be much irritation between the two countries over

the slavery question, in which view he was entirely correct. This subject was omitted from the treaty. Great Britain had never formally agreed that she would not impress our seamen and although the grievance was an old one, Benton thought it should be settled at once to avoid disagreements in the future. This was not done. Indeed, all that was accomplished, outside of the rectification of the Canadian frontier, was the establishment of an extradition system and an agreement to participate in the suppression of the slave trade.

It may seem strange that Benton should object particularly to the last provision, seeing that he considered the slave trade odious. He took the position that, under the circumstances, since we had received nothing in the treaty from Great Britain, we should not have agreed to a clause to carry out which would cost us millions. He thought Great Britain was not the country to grow suddenly virtuous on the slavery question, since her earlier career had been one in defense of the institution. She had fastened the evil upon this country in spite of many early efforts to get rid of it. In this position Benton does not appear to very great advantage. Of course it was a part of his general plan to prevent agitation. He foresaw

that the agreement would lead to friction but in this case his wisdom was open to question, since the suppression of the slave trade had become an absolute necessity owing to the boldness of the slavers who had no hesitancy in running cargoes into Cuba and even into this country by connivance with public officials.

Financial affairs also attracted much of Benton's attention, for the government was again running behind in its receipts. It was difficult to borrow money on easy terms and resort was had to treasury notes. Benton was the watch-dog of the treasury in those days though he seems to have had the usual experience of such self-constituted officials, achieving only moderate success. The establishment in all respects was small as compared with that of modern times yet some expenditures seemed to Benton extravagant and he never ceased to decry appropriations when he thought them useless. As we have seen he desired the Navy reduced in size and the West Point Academy abolished. When the telegraph was invented it seemed to him that in conjunction with the railroad the art of defense would be so perfect that we could do very well with a small army and almost no navy.

When a train could reach the seacoast from St. Louis in sixty hours, he thought that such rapid disposition of forces made it unnecessary to have a large army, as he considered mobility superior to numbers. In a sense this view was correct but the Civil War demonstrated the weakness of the theory.

One of the minor subjects of expense which he attacked was the coast survey. He thought this work should be undertaken by the officers of the Navy, instead of by a body of salaried men in civil life who seemed to him to be protracting the task unnecessarily. Here again Benton erred. The task is not yet completed, although the services of the men engaged in the work have been notable.

Benton never had much appreciation of a large diplomatic service and though his eyes were constantly fixed on the Far East, he had his own ideas as to the methods to be employed if commerce were to be secured with that part of the world. When Caleb Cushing was sent as special envoy to the Emperor of China and negotiated a treaty under most extraordinary circumstances, amounting almost to duress, Benton did not hesitate to attack him bitterly. He alleged that much more could have been achieved if greater courtesy and tact had been em-

ployed, in which view he was probably correct, as a train of troubles followed the first treaty, the scars from which have never yet been healed; but he made more of the alleged derelictions of Cushing than now seem to have been justified. Benton's principal fault was that he could not easily be moderate in his denunciation of what he considered wrong and when his anger fell upon an individual whom he felt had in any way violated national honor, the force of his displeasure was terrible in its expression. His temper was shown during many of the debates when he appeared as the champion of Tyler, the renegade Whig whom the real Whig leaders assailed vigorously.

When the second tariff veto message reached the Senate in 1842, the floor and galleries were crowded. On conclusion of the reading a storm of hisses broke forth followed by applause. This was an unusual breach of the decorum of the Senate and Benton vehemently condemned the outrage. Of course he was delighted with the veto but he would have been as ready to attack his own friends as his enemies for hissing. He immediately called the attention of the chair to the situation and the president *pro tem.* rapped for order. This did not satisfy Benton, as he thought the raps should be on the



offenders' heads and not on the table. In an impassioned speech he demanded that the ruffians who had hissed and whom he accused of being friends of the old bank should be brought before the bar of the Senate. For the moment this incident eclipsed the veto message in interest as several senators interposed, saying they had not heard the hisses and thought Mr. Benton was mistaken. That gentleman became aroused and made another fiery onslaught on his foes, alleging that he had distinctly heard them and that such conduct was an outrage on the President as well as the Senate.

It would appear from the testimony of other senators who were present that the hisses could not have been very loud or long and that Benton was probably unduly alert on this occasion. His motion to have the offender brought to the bar of the Senate was resisted and Buchanan undertook the rôle of peacemaker. He had heard a slight hiss but thought the matter a trifling one and felt certain that Benton would withdraw his motion, whereupon that Senator cried out: "I never will, so help me God."

The discussion was prolonged for some time and finally the man was discovered by the sergeant-at-arms and brought to the bar where he apologized

and Benton, considering that the dignity of the Senate had been restored, permitted him to go.

The incident may be considered a not very important one but it is interesting as showing the manner in which Benton believed public business should be conducted. He had been the object of an assault on a somewhat similar occasion a few years before when the expunging resolution was passed and he was determined to put an end to it.

Benton's earthly career was almost ended by the explosion of the gun Peacemaker on board the U. S. S. *Princeton*. The trip of this vessel down the Potomac in February, 1844, was a gala event. President Tyler was on board with Miss Gardiner, whom he was soon to marry, and most of the members of his cabinet as well as many distinguished visitors were in the party. One of the events of the day was the firing of the great cannon that was so inappropriately named. There was some flaw in its construction or the charge was too heavy, and after a number of shots had been fired the gun burst, killing two members of the cabinet, one of the naval officers, and Mr. Gardiner, the President's prospective father-in-law.

Benton took a great deal of interest in the journey and as the table had no pleasures for him, he

busied himself in examining every feature of the boat and the gun. Undoubtedly he would have been among the slain had not one of the officers, knowing his interest in the subject, said to him that he could get a much better view if he would mount a gun carriage directly behind the Peacemaker and thus watch the course of the ball. This he did and was saved, though for a moment it was supposed that he was numbered among the victims. His own description of his experience at that moment, though cumbrously written, is graphic. He says :

“I saw the hammer pull back, heard a tap, saw a flash, felt a blast in the face, knew that my hat was gone; and that was the last I knew of the world, or myself, for a time, of which I can give no account. The first that I knew of myself, or anything afterward, was rising up at the breach of the gun, seeing the gun itself split open—two seamen, the blood oozing from their ears and nostrils, rising and reeling near me—Commodore Stockton, hat gone and face blackened, standing bolt upright, staring fixedly upon the shattered gun. I heard no noise—no more than the dead. I only knew that the gun had burst from seeing its fragments. I felt no injury, and put my arm under the head of a seaman, endeavoring to rise and falling back. By

that time friends had run up and led me to the bow—telling me afterward that there was a supernatural whiteness in my face and hands—all the blood in fact having been driven from the surface.

For myself I had gone through the experience of sudden death, as if from lightning, which extinguishes knowledge and sensation and takes one out of the world without thought or feeling. I think I know what it is to die without knowing it—and that such a death is nothing to him that revives. The rapid and lucid workings of the mind to the instant of extinction, is the marvel that still astonishes me. I heard the tap, saw the flash, felt the blast, and knew nothing of the explosion. I was cut off in that inappreciable point of time which intervenes between the flash and the fire—between the burning of the powder in the touch-hole, and the burning of it in the gun. No mind can seize that point of time—no thought can measure it; yet to me it was distinctly marked, divided life from death—the life that sees, and feels, and knows—from death (for such it was for the time) which annihilates self and the world. And now is credible to me, or rather comprehensible, what persons have told me of a rapid and clear working of

the mind in sudden and dreadful catastrophies—as in steamboat explosions and being blown into the air and have the events of their lives pass in review before them, and even speculate on the chances of falling on the deck, and being crushed, or falling on the water and swimming ; and persons recovered from drowning, and running their whole lives over in the interval between losing hope and losing consciousness.’’

This tragic event had a very considerable effect on politics, as the two cabinet vacancies were filled by men who up to this time had not been considered for the posts, one of them being Calhoun.

When the Presidential election was coming on Tyler’s enemies were determined that his ambition to succeed himself should not be gratified. Calhoun perceiving that he could not be nominated if the convention were held in December, as was expected, manoeuvred so that it was postponed until the spring of 1844. The Whigs were induced to take the same course. Van Buren was the candidate of a large majority of the Democrats, and, if instructions had been followed would have been nominated, but the two-thirds rule was adopted and after having disposed of all the candidates,

one by one (Calhoun having withdrawn before this time), James K. Polk, the first "dark horse" in the history of the presidency, was nominated. Great was the grief of the old stalwart Democrats, but as Polk could not be accounted a party to the affair, he was absolved from blame.

Although the Oregon boundary was omitted from the Ashburton treaty, the subject was kept alive by an exchange of notes. Calhoun had agreed to extend the line along the forty-ninth parallel to the Pacific, expecting the proposal to be accepted; but when the British desired the Columbia River, he withdrew the offer. During the campaign of 1844 the country was in a state of wild excitement over this northwestern boundary question. The Democratic convention had announced that the latitude fifty-four degrees and forty minutes was the very lowest we would take and throughout the campaign the party slogan was "Fifty-four Forty or Fight." It was senseless, as such campaign cries are likely to be, for of those who prepared the party platform or raised the cry, not one had any intimate knowledge of the subject. It was a species of jingoism and at that time it was always safe for a party leader to rouse the people's passions against Great Britain by talking of real

or fancied wrongs. The country was unduly excited over the subject and the prospects of war were by no means remote.

President Polk in his inaugural address took strong ground and in his first message announced that "fifty-four forty" was our line and must be maintained. As the subject was then under negotiation this was not a diplomatic announcement. As a matter of fact, Polk was preparing for the Mexican War and did not desire a difficulty with Great Britain at the same time. The more he looked into the subject the more convinced he was that his own protestations and those of his party in favor of "fifty-four forty" had not a leg to stand on, but he was not disposed publicly to admit his mistake. There was one man in public life at this time who was not afraid to say what he thought and that man was Thomas H. Benton. He urged the President not to persist in a course which certainly meant war and to take a position which in the eyes of the world could not be maintained. For twenty-five years Benton had studied the Oregon question. It will be remembered that he succeeded in saving that country to the Union when many wished to let it go. There was no living man who knew so much about the subject and it was natural

that the President should turn to Benton though they were not then on intimate terms.

Now developed one of the most curious of political situations. Benton stood up manfully and denounced the extremists. He said the claim could not be sustained. At this statement the press all over the United States again became furious against him. Probably no man in history has been more vilified than he was at this time. He was called a coward, a renegade, a friend of Great Britain, and all sorts of insinuations were leveled against him, except that he had any personal interest in the matter or was guided by financial or other base considerations. That charge was never brought so far as can be discovered, and if made it would have been palpably untrue. But the flood-gates of malice were turned loose against him and a common thief could not have been so much abused. During all this storm Benton stood firm. It must have wounded his vanity but he never changed his course. There were a few Democratic senators willing to express an opinion of the same sort, but there was another *coterie* of irreconcilables who continued to sympathize with the President and justify his extreme position.

Polk was now in the attitude of the man in the



embrace of a bear who wanted some one to help him let go of the brute. In this dilemma he again sent for Benton and asked his aid. Benton told him frankly that he should accept the offer of the forty-ninth parallel which Great Britain had just made. To do anything else would make war inevitable ; moreover the line was the only proper one. Polk asked Benton to see what the Whigs would do. Perhaps this was the first time in our history that the opposition was canvassed with a view to enlisting it on the side of the administration. Benton said that he believed he could secure enough senators to ratify the treaty, and in fact he did so after making a speech so logical and so full of information that no man who had not ulterior motives could resist its appeal.

Another difficulty had arisen. Polk, feeling that he was committed on the other side and that he could not afford to do what he should because of political considerations, was in a quandary when Benton proposed that he adopt the constitutional method of asking the advice of the Senate on the subject. This would break the fall. Polk did so and thereupon his organ, the *Union*, attacked Benton bitterly day after day, at the very time that he was trying to carry out the President's wishes. A

smaller man would not have submitted to such treatment, but Benton sought results and did not care for methods. He desired a peaceful and honorable settlement and by means of his great influence over the Whigs and those Democrats in the Senate who were tractable, in 1846 the treaty was confirmed.

It is difficult for us at this day to appreciate how much moral courage was required of Benton in this matter. Partisanship is less intense now than at that time, and a change of party affiliation more readily condoned. No man but Benton could have withstood the wrath of the public and the opinion of no other man that the treaty was just could have been made to prevail.

Benton's interest in Oregon had now become personal in a peculiar sense. There was in the regular army at this time a dashing young lieutenant, a topographical engineer, named John C. Frémont. As Benton had four beautiful daughters and Miss Jessie was the acknowledged belle of Washington, it was natural that Frémont should be a visitor at the house, where he soon became more than a casual friend. If Benton had known that the young man was laying siege to the heart of his daughter, it is certain Frémont would have been ordered to

the most distant post in the land. He liked Frémont, for the young officer had made a trip to Oregon with an exploring party and had brought back an immense amount of information concerning the country. He was meditating a second, which had been authorized by the War Department engineers. Naturally Benton desired to learn much from the young man and it soon became a case of Othello, Desdemona and Brabantio. Miss Jessie well knew that her father would never consent to her marriage to a poor lieutenant, so the young couple eloped. Terrible was the wrath of Benton, as his daughter had suspected. At first he threatened all sorts of punishment but when his rage had cooled, his daughter managed, as pretty and intelligent girls usually will, to overcome his opposition and peace was restored in the family, though Benton was long in forgiving Frémont and perhaps would not have done so at all had the latter not been made the subject of persecution.

Frémont now hurried off on his second expedition for he learned there was some likelihood that it would be postponed. He had only twenty-five men and with these he hastened to a post in western Missouri, leaving his wife at her father's home in St. Louis. Frémont's suspicions were correct.

When the War Department found that he had requisitioned a mountain howitzer, it became alarmed, fearing that the expedition would lead to unfortunate consequences as it looked to be military rather than scientific. Orders were at once despatched for his recall and he was charged personally with the cannon he had taken. The mail was forwarded to St. Louis, where the young and ambitious wife took the precaution to open it and discreetly kept the letter of recall. Thus Frémont got away. This time his explorations were of more notable value. On his return he was complimented and brevetted, and soon prepared for a third expedition which had more serious consequences.

Senator Benton upheld his daughter Jessie in all she had done in this matter, though she was wise enough not to tell him until the young man was well out of his reach.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>See Jessie Benton Frémont's sketch of her father's life.

## CHAPTER X

### SLAVERY AGITATION AND TEXAS

DURING Jackson's administrations the subject of slavery had been injected prominently into the Senate. As Benton frequently had occasion to remark, he was opposed equally to slavery agitation and slavery extension. He wished that things should be left as they were and on all occasions tried to smother discussion of a subject which was becoming more and more important every day, because of the acts of men both North and South. The pioneer anti-slavery society in the country was composed of Friends who were accustomed to meet yearly, passing resolutions and occasionally petitioning Congress on the subject. Usually their petitions were received and laid on the table without further action ; but in Jackson's second term both House and Senate were besieged by petitions not only from Friends and other organized societies but from hosts of individuals, all bearing upon one or another phase of the slavery question. These rapidly increased in number after the nullification

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threats of Calhoun and his *coterie*. If the North thought that slavery was the cause of all the trouble, so did the South. The question at issue was whether more concessions should be made to the slave-power or whether the evil should be restricted wherever possible. The agitation which was started at this time, lasted for thirty years and resulted in the emancipation of the slave under most extraordinary circumstances. Nothing is more certain than that manumission would have been delayed for a long time, in the end probably being gradual, had not the ill-advised friends of slavery forced the issue at a time that they thought they were smothering it. The Abolitionists were just as radical and thus a crisis was reached.

The postmaster-general having refused without warrant to carry through the mails certain newspapers containing diatribes against slavery which were declared to be "incendiary," a bill was introduced making it a penalty for any postmaster or other Federal employee to forward such matter. This was a setting up of a public censorship that would have led to serious results. The bill was warmly endorsed by Calhoun who made speeches on the subject, in which he returned to his favorite topic of nullification and his prophecy as to the

breaking up of the republic unless the South could have its own way in the matter.

One cannot but have a certain amount of sympathy for Calhoun who felt so deeply on this subject and was doubtless as sincere as he was able. As a study in political pessimism his character is without an equal in our day. One trouble with him was that he assumed to speak for the whole South and all the slave-owners, whereas at this time he represented only a faction. If Calhoun could have kept silent, the bill might have passed ; but as he must renew his threats against the Union, there were those who would not follow him a step. Even Clay was dissatisfied with his own part in the previous compromise whereby South Carolina had been conciliated by a reduction of the tariff. Webster who had opposed the compromise and Benton who had also vigorously fought it, saw in Calhoun's conduct a justification for their action. They knew that he would never be satisfied and they did not intend to try to pacify him any further.

Benton deprecated the extreme views and measures of the Abolitionists and in many instances gave them much less credit than they deserved. His sympathies were with the slaveholders, in peaceful possession of their legal rights, but he

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may have been biased too much in their favor. One thing is certain: he altogether failed to see how impossible it was to suppress slavery agitation. He was continually crying peace, but there was no peace since in the controversy both sides were determined upon a war of extermination. In the postal censorship debate he had an angry colloquy with Calhoun in which the latter was censured for conjuring up ghosts to frighten the people. As to Calhoun's report on the bill Benton makes this comment, written many years afterward,—indeed after the last great compromise of 1850 had been effected :

“The insidiousness of this report was in the assumption of an actual impending danger of the abolition of slavery in all the slave states; the destruction of \$950,000,000 of property; the ocean of blood to be shed; the war of extermination between the two races and the necessity for extraordinary means to prevent these dire calamities; when the fact was, that there was not one particle of any such danger. The assumption was contrary to fact; the report was inflammatory and disorganizing; and if there was anything enigmatical in its conclusions it was sufficiently interpreted in the contemporaneous publications in the Southern slave



States which were open in their declarations that a cause for separation had occurred, limited only by the conduct of the free states in suppressing within a given time the incendiary societies within their borders. This limitation would throw the responsibility of disunion upon the non-slaveholding states failing to suppress these societies.’

Fortunately there were other Southern men besides Benton who opposed Calhoun, among them Henry Clay, King of Georgia, and Leigh of Virginia. The bill was confused with the petition of the Friends for the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia and the debates which ensued covered the whole ground.

When it came to a vote on the bill Calhoun and his party saw that they were beaten, but they resolved to prolong the contest. Van Buren, the Vice-president who was slated for the Democratic nomination to succeed Jackson, was singled out for attack. By leaving the Senate in precisely the required numbers at various times while the debate was in progress, it was necessary for Van Buren to cast the deciding vote. When it came to the vote on engrossment the Vice-president was not in his seat, having retired behind the chair. Calhoun was angry when he saw the chair empty and

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in a voice betraying his agitation, he cried out that the sergeant-at-arms must seek the Vice-president and bring him to the Senate. This was a petty performance, utterly unworthy of the man or the occasion. Van Buren, who was one of the most imperturbable of statesmen, calmly came forward and gave his casting vote for the engrossment. Calhoun hoped that this act would hurt Van Buren in the North, but it did not in the least.

Benton had wearied of Calhoun's conduct and never ceased to inveigh against it, but he still insisted that there was no danger of serious sectional dispute. When the time came he was one of the sturdiest opponents of further compromise, but again he was outvoted by the radicals on both sides of Mason and Dixon's line who thought they knew so much better than he what was for the commonweal.

One reason that led Benton to believe there was no desire on the part of the North or the South to interfere with the rights of slaveholders was that at this very session (1836-7) he had succeeded in having the limits of the state of Missouri extended at the extreme northwest so as to include a strip of very desirable land between the Missouri River and the former boundary,—an alteration of that

meridian which now bounds the greater part of the state on the west. This was a body of land about the size of Delaware and in that section forever dedicated to freedom by the Missouri Compromise. To Benton's gratification there was only the feeblest objection to the extension and with it went slavery. He frequently pointed to this circumstance in after years to show that the North had no desire to act unfairly and it is a pity there were not enough enlightened men to see that this was the case. The fact is that Benton was unblinded by prejudice in the matter while sooner or later most people became so imbued with their private views that they did not seek the truth, nor would they accept it when it was pointed out to them. This was disheartening to Benton who was optimistic almost to the last day of his life.

At this session Michigan and Arkansas applied for admission as states although for neither of them had Congress passed enabling acts ; and their applications were therefore considered premature. Special committees were appointed in the Senate to consider each petition. That of Michigan, the free state, was submitted to a committee of which Benton was chairman and that of the slave state to a committee headed by Buchanan, so that here at least

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there could be no fear that slavery would be unjustly treated by the North in the Senate. Benton with his usual liberality, especially toward the West, reported that the haste of Michigan was not a matter of moment, that she was entitled to admission and the bill passed easily. Arkansas was admitted by a still larger vote, Clay and four other senators being the sole opponents. In the House some excitement was caused by John Quincy Adams' opposition to a clause in the constitution of Arkansas that seemed to make impossible the freeing of any slave. Adams said that he had his personal views about slavery but felt it his duty to permit Arkansas to enter the Union as a slave state. His amendment requiring a change in the constitution, failed to pass, although it was the subject of an all-night struggle.

It was in this debate that Adams made the ominous statement not much thought of at the time but afterward remembered. He said that Congress in time of peace had no right to abolish slavery, by implication giving it as his opinion that the slaves could be emancipated in time of war, a discovery usually credited to President Lincoln.

During the Van Buren administration the angry contest between the Abolitionists and the slave-

holders over the right of petition took place in the House of Representatives. In the Senate it had become the accepted rule to receive such petitions in silence unless some member took occasion to offer remarks upon the subject and bring on one of those altercations which Benton so greatly desired to avoid. In the House John Quincy Adams gained his title of "the old man eloquent" by his championship of the right of these petitioners to be heard. We shall obtain an entirely erroneous idea if we suppose that by the constitutional right of petition was meant simply the right to send documents to Congress. What was intended was the reference of such petitions to a committee which would make a report on the subject. The so-called "gag-law" was simply a resolution physically to present these petitions to Congress when no further attention would be paid to them. Over this subject the contest raged and though the slaveholders won, Adams kept up the struggle against the system until it was later sensibly modified.

Benton sat silent through these debates. He maintained that discussion was the worst possible means of suppressing the evils complained of and thought the fears of Calhoun were all ghosts. He saw that no sooner was one position taken to meet

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the objections of the Southerners than they shifted their ground and made new demands. Calhoun who had supported the Missouri Compromise, again assailed it as an evil measure which was certain, if persisted in, to ruin the country. This contention of Calhoun's was becoming exceedingly galling to Benton, who knew that there was no danger of Northern interference with the slavery system, no matter how many petitions of individuals or societies were sent to Congress. He foresaw too, if Calhoun continued to assert that the slave states would sooner or later secede, that the North would arise and take some radical action. Benton frequently referred to the words of Madison who in the last year of his life, at the age of eighty-eight, with unequaled knowledge of our history, gained by personal contact, solemnly stated that while Calhoun and his group might really mean no harm by their threats, they were undoubtedly educating a set of younger men in their beliefs who would go to further lengths and would unite the whole South on some critical occasion when nullification would be the first step, secession and separation the last.

The Texas question had not been allowed to slumber since Monroe, at the North's behest, re-

fused to accept this great territory from Spain. Benton was enraged over the action and denounced Monroe for it until he found that all the members of the cabinet had concurred in the decision. He still believed that it was a tactical error and one that must be corrected sooner or later. His old friend, Sam Houston, who had been a corporal in his regiment in the War of 1812, had mystified and astonished all his friends after his election to the governorship of Tennessee in 1826, by suddenly disappearing under circumstances which have never to this day been satisfactorily explained.<sup>1</sup> Going to Texas which was then a Mecca for Americans, especially if they had got into difficulty at home, he soon engaged himself with the revolutionists who waged perpetual war against Mexico, a republic in name and a despotism in operation. At the battle of San Jacinto, Houston won a complete victory over General Santa Anna and Texas thereafter asserted her independence. In this territory could be seen several potential slave states. Under existing conditions there was only one more slave state in view, Florida, but she made such slow progress in population and was the scene of an

<sup>1</sup> See "Recollections of Fifty Years," by A. K. McClure, for one account of this disappearance.

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Indian war so long and bloody, that her admission was likely to suffer long postponement.

In 1836 a proposal was made for the annexation of Texas but that state was still engaged in fighting Mexico and had not asked the privilege. In 1838 the Texans made formal application for statehood although the war continued in a desultory way. As the administration was not ready for war with Mexico, the subject was given very little consideration and was laid on the table in the Senate by a decisive vote. Benton, in spite of his belief that we should have held Texas, was not willing to fight for it now, especially as such action would reopen the slavery question. His constant hope of quelling this agitation is creditable to his heart but not to his head, since if there were one thing that could not be suppressed it was this very subject which propagandists on both sides were discussing incessantly.

In Tyler's administration the question came forward once more, and in a more ominous way. The President was scheming for re-election and his chief issue was Texas. He had played the Whigs false and the Democrats were willing to use him as a tool but he still believed that he was to be his own successor. Texan annexation he thought would



secure him a "solid South" while Northern Democrats would come to his support, assuring him the victory.

The first movement in this direction was the publication of a broadside in a newspaper, stating that Great Britain was about to annex Texas and seize Oregon, when she would have this nation encompassed on all sides. The article was adroit, seemingly based on genuine information, cunningly calculated to alarm the American people and carefully concealing the underlying slavery question. Benton had no faith in such news. He believed that Calhoun was the author of the article or at least had inspired it. At this time Calhoun, made Secretary of State through the *Princeton* disaster, was a candidate for the presidential nomination. His whole soul was in the Texas annexation scheme but he perceived that it was surrounded with many difficulties. A more ingenious ruse was never invented in politics than that which was prepared and carried out to secure Texas. From the first Benton was considered an important factor in the affair but as he was a foe of Calhoun it was necessary to approach him diplomatically. This was done through the medium of Senator Brown, of Tennessee, an old companion, who came to Ben-

ton with many warm expressions of friendship and congratulated him on the fact that at last Texas was to be joined to the Union. Benton was no man to be captured with soft words. To Brown's suavity he replied :

“Texan annexation as now planned is on the part of some an intrigue for the presidency and a plot to dissolve the Union; on the part of others a Texas scrip and land speculation, and I am against it.”

This was a severe blow to the Southern men and it was seen that haste must be made to commit Jackson to annexation. By means of clever diplomacy, by playing on the old man's patriotism and his vanity, the ruse succeeded and Jackson declared strongly for the treaty of annexation, much to the disgust of Benton and many of “Old Hickory's” stoutest friends. Jackson perceived, when it was too late, that he had unwittingly aimed a blow at the renomination of Van Buren and sought in vain to counteract the effect of his action.

Then came a most surprising development. Although the letter alleging that Great Britain was about to annex Texas had no official standing whatever, the English government was induced

to take note of it and Lord Aberdeen, British Foreign Secretary, wrote a despatch in which an emphatic denial was given to the rumor. This was proper enough but his lordship made a most extraordinary blunder by announcing in the course of his despatch, that "Great Britain desires, and is constantly exerting herself to procure, the general abolition of slavery throughout the world."

It was true that his government had nothing whatever to do with American slavery and would never interfere in our domestic affairs, but the announcement set the country aflame. Calhoun and his followers were beside themselves with rage. The Abolitionists welcomed the statement and it was an invitation to continue their propaganda. After the signing of the treaty in April, 1844, to annex Texas suddenly and by stealth, Secretary of State Calhoun, proceeded to reply to Lord Aberdeen in a despatch which must have amazed that dignified gentleman. It was a stump speech, addressed to the American people and contained data which was of no interest to Great Britain—indeed it was hardly comprehensible in England. It was an argument for slavery and its extension and contained an alleged compilation of statistics showing how much better morally, spiritually and phys-

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ically were the slaves than the free blacks. The document had its uses in forwarding the Texas matter, but the trick was discovered and exposed by Benton who proceeded, as he said, to "pull the devil from under the blanket," meaning Calhoun.

Benton's position was now very peculiar. He was opposed to the annexation of Texas by the treaty which had been secretly and underhandedly negotiated only to fail by a decisive vote in the Senate. He felt that no such important treaty should be carried through without legislative action and some consideration for Mexico. In these days it is easy for us to say that Mexico was still sovereign over the disputed territory and that the Texan affair was a conspiracy from beginning to end. If there had been a good government in Mexico, if there had been a proper administrative supervision of Texas from the Mexican capital, there might be something in this contention. But this was not the case.

The discussion proceeded after the election of Polk. Although disappointed because of Van Buren's defeat in 1844, Benton had felt called upon to support the party candidate in this campaign. Polk was an open and avowed annexationist but with some reserve since he desired to

respect the rights of all who were involved in the contest.

At the session of 1844-45, the Senate objected to the first annexation proposal which was fathered by the House and which was that Texas should come into the Union simply by a resolution of Congress to that effect. This was an unprecedented course. The Senate contained some members opposed to annexation on any terms and very few were favorable to this new suggestion since it seemed certain to result in war. There was no guarantee that Mexico would be satisfied with the boundary lines as they were fixed by Congress though this dispute was supposed to be provided for in the bill. It was alleged by senators of all parties that a matter of this sort required not only legislative action but diplomatic negotiation so that there should be an understanding among the three nations involved. Benton took the lead and introduced a resolution to the effect that annexation should be arranged for wholly by negotiation. The Senate favored this idea but the end of the session was now at hand and unless something were done speedily the matter must go over to the next Congress which was what the cooler heads preferred.

Senator Walker, of Mississippi, soon to enter

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upon a more distinguished career, now came forward with a proposal that the propositions of the House and the Senate be joined so that the President could take his choice. This was an extraordinary compromise, one that never could have been agreed to except that President-elect Polk was in town in conference with the leaders of the party and anxious to have something done. He announced that if the bill were passed in its dual form he would take the Senate's advice and send out a commission composed of able men, representing all shades of opinion on the subject. Benton agreed to this and after canvassing the Senate and House it was found that the measure could pass. It is true, the suggestion was offered that Tyler might at the last moment act on the annexation question himself. This idea was resented with indignation by members on both sides of the chamber who considered such a suggestion an imputation not only upon the President but upon the high office which he filled. When all possible guarantees seemed to be given, the Senate passed the bill with much reluctance and by a majority of only two votes. The House concurred and on Saturday, March 1, the measure went to the President and the senators were considering who should execute

the delicate commission. On Monday, when Congress met for its last legislative day, great was the surprise and anger of many members to learn that the "impossible infamy" had taken place, that Tyler had sent a commissioner to negotiate for the annexation of Texas according to the House plan and that Polk would be relieved of all responsibility in the matter.

The rage of the Senate knew no bounds and Benton was almost beside himself. He had been the unconscious instrument by which the country had taken over a war. Had he supposed for a moment that Tyler would act with such precipitancy and against the manifest wish of Congress, the bill would never have reached the President. The fraud, as Benton said, was "prolific of evil and pregnant with bloody fruit."

## CHAPTER XI

### THE WAR WITH MEXICO

BENTON, as we have seen, made no concealment of his belief that the war with Mexico was conceived in sin and born in iniquity, but like so many others of a similar opinion he found no recourse but to support the government after the contest had been begun. He always accused Calhoun of being the author of the war though that statesman was actually opposed to it, little supposing that his piece of trickery (for Calhoun is alleged to have led Tyler into it), would produce a clash of arms. South Carolina's great leader thought the Mexican government would dispose of its interest in Texas for a lump sum.

In Benton's view the war was the result of a conspiracy :

“On Sunday the second day of March—that day which preceded the last day of his [Tyler's] authority—and on that day, sacred to peace—the council sat that acted on the resolutions, and in the darkness of the night, howling with the storm and bat-



ting with the elements as if Heaven warred upon the audacious act (for well do I remember it), the fatal messenger was sent off which carried the selected resolution to Texas.''

This passage refers to Tyler's precipitate action in securing Texas when it was intended that Polk should negotiate for it on the basis of the Senate's bill. The messenger accomplished his mission but there was another task which was esteemed of more importance. Negotiations had been opened with General Santa Anna, the one-legged ex-dictator of Mexico, who had been in and out of power many times, and was now in exile. The plan was that as soon as the war should open, Santa Anna would be allowed to pass through the American lines and enter the City of Mexico where he was to counsel peace, Mexico receiving her *douceur* in a large sum of money. The first part of the program was carried out. Santa Anna reached Mexico by our own connivance but instead of being our friend, turned against us, raised the standard of Mexico, called the populace to his support, and conducted the war to the end with considerable ability in spite of his constant defeats.

Congress did not vote the two millions asked of it to buy off Mexico, and in the next Congress Polk

called for three millions to be employed secretly. There was opposition to such underhand use of money and any possibility of voting it was removed when David Wilmot, a member of the House from a northeast Pennsylvania district, offered the proviso bearing his name, which became the rallying point in politics for many years, and embodied the idea upon which the Republican party was essentially founded. This Proviso was to the effect that slavery should not be permitted in any territory secured as a result of the appropriation. It started the flames of slavery agitation once more, much to the disgust of Benton. He saw that this was what Calhoun desired, since it gave him an issue on which to continue his nullification propaganda.

Benton, as usual, saw no occasion for forcing the contest. He said there was no reason for the Proviso as there was no slavery in the territory in question and it would be time enough to settle the matter when it came up in concrete form. He did not succeed in suppressing the Wilmot idea, as it remained the most potent suggestion in regard to slavery restriction which had yet been offered. It also had for its effect the birth of the Southern doctrine that Congress had no right to legislate respecting slavery in the territories. This was a proposition so

contrary to fact and to the former beliefs of Calhoun, that it was long ere Benton could be convinced that a stand was to be made on this theory. He had now some ten years more of public life and to the last he fought this proposition which was not only false in principle but was, as he said, "a damnable heresy."

This issue marked a crisis in his political life. Hitherto he had fought with much success against the agitation of the slavery question and had been able to impress Northern and Southern statesmen with his view that there was nothing to agitate. He still maintained this position in public but it is easy to see that he was not well convinced of the truth of his theory. As he saw the disciples of Calhoun increase in numbers his heart began to fail him. He would not support the Wilmot Proviso but he gave no countenance to the nullifiers.

We must be just to Benton. He may have failed to discern the signs of coming storm, to realize that the battle must be fought between those who were on the side of the Proviso and those who thought with Calhoun that Congress could not legislate at all on slavery. He may have lacked that perceptive quality which he usually possessed in looking

at public questions. Or he may have seen the danger clearly enough, hoping that his policy of repression would finally win. As a matter of fact, we know that the outcome was not what he had expected and that the contest between the two elements in the country continued to grow fiercer, with a single temporary interruption, until the Civil War.

Perhaps it was too much to expect that a man of more than sixty who had so long fought for the integrity of the Union would change his views easily. It can be asserted without fear of contradiction that there never was a moment when he did not strive to do his whole duty as he saw it, and that as he became older his determination grew stronger to smite the monster of nullification.

When Congress met again Benton was once more called into conference with the President, who admired him and respected him though the two men had no political affiliations. Polk had determined on a campaign of "masterly inactivity." By this time Taylor had fought the battles of Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma, had crossed over to Matamoras and had taken Monterey. The news of the first bloodshed had inflamed the country and Congress at its late session had provided for an increase of the army and some volunteers. Polk

had sent to Congress the lying message in which he declared that the war had been inaugurated by Mexico through the shedding of American blood on American soil. Though knowing that it was false, Congress voted him men and money and Benton had spent a vacation at home heartsick over the situation. He was convinced, however, that if there was to be a war it had better be a short and aggressive one. He was not of those who relied upon the promises of the administration that there would be no war, or that, after hostilities had begun it would last from sixty to ninety days, or four months at the most. Benton was perhaps the ripest Spanish scholar in the country. He was better versed in the history of the Spanish-American states than any man in public life and had no illusions on the subject. He knew that the military spirit was aroused in Mexico and in spite of the fact that there was so large a proportion of our people who believed the war unjust, it was certain there would be no lack of men on our side to uphold the banners of the nation.

He was therefore much chagrined when Polk showed him his annual message and asked his views concerning that portion which dealt with the war. It exasperated Benton to find that the idea of the

President, supported unanimously by his cabinet, was to do nothing, wasting time in negotiation, the real expectation being that Mexico could be "bought off." Benton, as requested, replied in a letter in which he made strong objections to the proposed plan of "masterly inactivity." His policy, as outlined therein, was to attack Vera Cruz, capture it and send an army on the road to Mexico City, following the route taken by Cortez centuries before. To do this there must be another call for volunteers, as it was neither practicable nor popular to raise regulars hastily for the purpose.

Polk was much impressed by this proposal and invited Benton to a cabinet meeting where the whole plan was considered carefully and rejected. The Secretary of War had been telling the governors of the States that no more volunteers were needed and he did not wish to change his policy. Benton finally had his own way, much to the annoyance of the cabinet, and the plan to prosecute the war actively was adopted. This was exactly what General Scott wished. He himself desired to go forward and fight his way to the Mexican capital. He was at the head of the army and it was natural and right that he should have the place, but Taylor had achieved so much success that he could not

well be superseded. This was the situation in a military way, while political considerations were of much more importance. Taylor was a Whig and already there had been talk of making him a candidate for the presidency. Scott also heard the buzzing of the Presidential bee and the administration was perfectly well aware that the war would yield a candidate who would in all probability succeed at the polls. It was maddening to think that a Whig might profit by the Mexican victories and Polk was anxious to have a Democrat take the leadership if possible. As there was no Democrat in the army of the necessary qualifications the thought arose in the President's mind that Benton would be the man for the place.<sup>1</sup> He had been a colonel of volunteers in the War of 1812 and a lieutenant-colonel in the regular army when he had actual rank ahead of either Taylor or Scott. It does not seem to have been Polk's idea that Benton should command upon the battle-field, but he was to go to the front as lieutenant-general and exercise an oversight over the two contending armies, and particularly to make the treaty of peace when the fighting had come to an end. Benton rather ex-

<sup>1</sup>In some accounts it is stated that Benton was the first to make the suggestion.

pected to stay in Washington and deal with grand strategy only.

It is really singular to think that he should ever have entertained such a proposal. It is true that he was commonly called "Colonel" Benton and was proud of the very little experience he had in war, though none of it was gained in actual combat. But that he was not trained in the art of war every one knows and that he would have developed competency seems most improbable. It was here that the vanity of the man appeared. He loved the pomp and circumstance of war and was desirous of popular applause of all kinds. He would have loved to come home as the conqueror, ready to take the presidency. And it is certain that this plan would have been carried out had not some of his own party opposed the project, among them Buchanan, who in the elevation of Benton saw death to his own ambitions. Others who ought now really to have aided Benton, or refrained from opposing him, succeeded in killing the measure, so that he never wore the three stars he coveted and we can rejoice that he did not, since his true fame could not have been enhanced by waging a war to which he was sincerely opposed in principle. Later he was nominated and confirmed a major-



general but, after some curious backing and filling on the subject, declined the service.

Taylor was left on the Rio Grande, Scott fought his way to Mexico City and the war ended with the rape of Mexican territory as far West as the Pacific coast for which we paid an enormous sum to salve the national conscience.

The war had many peculiar phases. One incident in which Benton was peculiarly interested was the behavior of his son-in-law Frémont. On his third exploring expedition he dismissed topography from his mind and started off on his own account to capture California for the nation before he knew that a war with Mexico was in progress. Ostensibly he began operations in behalf of the local "patriots" who were all Americans, conducting a kind of revolution like the Texans, but he knew that the war was sure to come and saw that a British squadron was ready to seize the country. Therefore he took the initiative and won, gaining a good deal of rather cheap glory, as it proved in the end, while he might have been hanged had things turned out differently. As it was, when Frémont reached home he was court-martialed. Though Polk did not sustain the sentence of dismissal the young man resigned from the

army, later to enjoy a brief and spectacular career in politics and in the Civil War, after which he was forgotten for a generation.

Regardless of the morals of the contest it must be said that it rounded out our boundaries to their natural limits, the more so because railway transportation was fast developing and California was by no means so remote as twenty-five years before, when Benton supposed that the Rocky Mountains were our natural barrier.

It is noteworthy that although the country was divided on the issue of waging the war there was little objection to taking the unholy spoil. Whigs united with Democrats in voting all the money that was needed and though the Wilmot Proviso in one shape or another came up forty times in Congress it never passed both houses and the only result was a party shibboleth for the rising generation. It was all very well for Benton to say there was no danger, but there was danger. Nothing could now prevent a culmination of the issue. Calhoun was more convinced than ever that Congress had no right to legislate concerning slavery in the territories; that it was a national institution, carried by force of the Constitution wherever that instrument held sway; that any attempt to interfere with it

was certain cause for a disruption of the Union. And by this time he had gathered around him a number of young men who not only held his doctrines, but were willing to see them carried to their legitimate conclusion.

It had now become plain that Taylor would be the candidate of the Whig party in 1848 and that his chances of election were good. To prevent this result the administration resorted to all kinds of expedients. It recalled Trist who made the treaty. It recalled Scott from the field by a subterfuge. Polk and his advisers had done well from a practical point of view. They had re-established the independent treasury system ; enacted a new low tariff law which was bringing in a good deal of revenue ; floated loans at an advantageous rate and had been successful in the field in every encounter. Yet the administration could not command the support of the people, as they were determined to have "Old Zach," who had done so much of the fighting and whose victory at Buena Vista was one of the most notable in our annals.

Clay was disgusted at this manifestation of love for a military candidate, for once more the fires of ambition were burning in him. He was thrust aside for a man without civil experience. The

convention did not even adopt a platform. Taylor beat Clay, Scott, and Webster, and all the defeated men were so much disgruntled that they never recovered from the experience. Clay and Webster gave their adhesion only at the last moment, after the strongest expressions of disapproval of Taylor's candidacy.

The Democrats were doomed to defeat from the very beginning. At the regular convention there was a contest over seating the delegates from New York state. A bolt followed and led to the famous Free Soil Convention which nominated Van Buren. Cass was nominated by the regular Democracy. He maintained a neutral position on the slavery question after the convention had voted down some radical proposals from the South. Benton greatly deplored this split in the party and did not ally himself with the Van Buren men, though most of his personal friends were in that faction and it is probable that he adhered more closely to their view than to the other. Indeed, from this time forth Benton was a man without a party and his retirement from public life was caused by his refusal to take sides at a time when such action was imperative.

It is evident from the temper of his letters and

speeches that he was beginning to lose hope of converting the Calhoun party, and the rest of his life was devoted to preserving that Union he loved so much and had served so long and well.

There is pathos in his complaint that the Democratic party by adopting the two-thirds rule usurped popular powers, but as a matter of fact he objected to conventions as they were conducted, just as he continued to the last to inveigh against the method of electing the president and vice-president. He labored for a change in the system with a devotion and energy that were worthy of greater success. In fact, Benton had only one more great rôle to enact and his work in the Senate was done.

## CHAPTER XII

### THE COMPROMISES OF 1850

BENTON'S last stand was made in the first session of Congress which met under Taylor and never did he appear to such splendid advantage. The clouds of disunion were lowering and many felt the time had come when an accommodation could no longer be made between the two sections of the country. The immediate cause of dissatisfaction was the fact that California, which had rapidly increased in population under the stimulus of the gold discoveries, had held a convention and applied for admission as a state. In the convention there was only one vote for slavery. The result was disheartening to Calhoun and his school because they saw in our newly acquired territory ample room for enough states, with Texas dismembered, to keep up that equilibrium of free and slave commonwealths, declared by them to be absolutely essential to the preservation of the Union, which they were determined to destroy if such a relation were not maintained indefinitely.

The Whigs who had been so joyous over the

election of Taylor soon found there were many flies in the ointment and when Congress met in December, 1849, distrust and fear ruled. In the rearrangement of personal views over the question of slavery extension old political lines had been sadly broken. In the House only ninety-five members had been re-elected and the division on party lines was so close that a small number of independents held the balance of power in choosing a speaker. Winthrop was set aside and after a long contest which greatly delayed the business of the session Cobb, of Georgia, was elected by a plurality when it was found impossible to obtain a majority for any candidate.

By general agreement of all historians, the Senate which met that year was the most distinguished legislative body that ever sat in America. To read the names is to us what it was to the Greeks to call the roll of their commanders who went forth to capture Troy.<sup>1</sup>

Benton was the oldest of all in point of service but he was soon to disappear. Though there was a bitter three-cornered contest over the senatorship in Missouri, he remained at Washington and attended to his duties like a Roman. Every word he

<sup>1</sup> Blaine's "Twenty Years in Congress."

uttered was scrutinized and he never faltered for an instant in the devotion to those principles which he had championed for thirty years.

Here sat for the last time the members of the great triumvirate, men whose like has never been known in our history before or since ; men whose transcendent abilities had in every case been prostituted to ambition. Of this combination it was said that they were "always in rivalry, invincible in union, and terrible in opposition." Clay had come back at the earnest behest of Kentucky to make one more effort to save the Union. He was old and feeble ; the cough which finally resulted in his death annoyed him greatly and he had to be helped up and down the marble steps. Webster sat in his seat very seldom. He was engaged in arguments before the Supreme Court and was nursing a grievance. He had denounced the nomination of Taylor as one not fit to be made. Long coveting the honor for himself, to see a backwoods colonel suddenly elevated to the chief magistracy was more than his proud spirit could bear. He gave no sign of his purposes for some time. Calhoun was on the verge of the grave but as defiant as ever. The edifice of secession which was being reared so that all could be-



hold it, was his own work and though he was not to see it completed he had able lieutenants who were to carry nullification into secession and civil war.

These were the four great men of the Senate and in many respects Benton towered above them all. In moral courage and self-sacrifice he was easily superior; in patriotism the equal of any. No siren voice could charm him from devotion to the Union and the laws. He was willing to meet defeat rather than deviate, compromise or equivocate; while the other three were willing to do almost anything to avoid the crisis which impended.

Of the younger men there was Seward, who was to speak the sentiments of a coming age and announce his "higher law," so shocking to Benton and the older men. There was Jefferson Davis, son-in-law of the President and his strongest political foe, the man who was to preside over the Confederacy through its brief and stormy existence. Douglas was a Northern trimmer to be overthrown at last by Lincoln. Corwin and Chase sat for Ohio, two of the ablest men that state ever produced and both ambitious. Sam Houston, the Union-loving liberator of Texas, was the handsomest man in the

body and by some esteemed the finest-looking man in America. From Michigan came Cass, "Old Dough Face," so often a candidate for the presidential nomination. Bell, of Tennessee; Hale, of New Hampshire; and Hannibal Hamlin, were soon to be better known in politics as contestants for high honors. Virginia sent Mason and Hunter, later to be distinguished officers under the Confederacy. King, of Alabama, soon to be elected Vice-president; Soulé, of Louisiana, who tried to pick a quarrel with Spain; Berrien, of Georgia; Butler, of South Carolina, whom Sumner attacked; Davis, of Massachusetts; the Dodges, father and son, who sat for Wisconsin and Iowa; and the redoubtable James Shields, who started to fight a duel with Lincoln—these are but a few of those who held high inquest over the state of the Union and made the Compromises.

The membership of the House was less distinguished but it contained many men of first-rate abilities who were later to become known to fame.

The Senate had plenty of time to think over matters while the House spent weeks in electing a speaker. When the President's message was finally received it was found to be a patriotic document. Taylor desired peace but he was determined to

have it by fighting if necessary and made this bold announcement. He recommended the admission of California as a free state, independent of any other considerations. This was the chief issue of the hour and on it Benton's mind was long made up. In a sense he was the father of California. He had spoken for the Pacific coast when some of his colleagues were mere boys. He had aided his son-in-law, Frémont, to make his buccaneering expedition to the Southwest, and as he had stood by the young man when he was disgraced, it was no small joy to see him returning as one of the new senators-elect. If the California case had been opposed to Benton's ideas of legality Frémont would have met a Roman antagonist in the aged senator, but fortunately they were at this time in political accord.

Why should California not be admitted, asked Benton? She had the requisite population and was rapidly growing, while the wealth in her mines was fabulous. Slavery was not wanted by the people, and the system could not have been made available to any great extent even if desired. Why not admit her?

The answer of Calhoun and his associates was that it was robbery of the South to make Cali-

for California a free state even if she desired to be free. Calhoun had personally forced the Mexican War for the express purpose of slavery extension and did not propose to be deprived of the fruit. Moreover there were other things to be considered. How about the territories of Utah and New Mexico (then including Arizona)? How about the claim of Texas to a vast amount of territory which the administration had not allowed? How about a fugitive slave law, now that the one in existence had been rendered practically nugatory in places where the local opposition to slavery was strong? No, said Calhoun, we will not settle California's status without considering these other things.

It was useless for Benton to talk to Calhoun and he found the new school of Whigs, soon to become the founders of the Republican party, not much more tractable. They wished the slave trade suppressed in the District of Columbia. They had no desire for a stringent fugitive slave law and were opposed to any extension of slavery in the territories where the evil had not existed previously, making their stand upon the Wilmot Proviso. Nevertheless there were many who were perturbed over the situation and eager for some way out of danger. It was to Clay that all looked for a plan

of harmony. His long experience as a compromiser was such that if he could not solve the great problem, all were willing to believe it impossible to do so.

Late in January, 1850, Clay brought forward his plan, after he had consulted with Calhoun and Webster who had yielded assent. There were "five bleeding wounds" in the Republic and he proposed to dress and heal them in this fashion :

First. California to be admitted with her free constitution.

Second. Territorial governments to be erected in Utah and New Mexico, leaving the matter of slavery to be settled at the time of admission as States.

Third. Texas' impossible claims to be bought off with millions of money.

Fourth. A more stringent fugitive slave law under federal supervision to be enacted ; slavery not to be abolished in the District of Columbia without the consent of Maryland and Virginia.

Fifth. The slave trade to be practically abolished in the District of Columbia.

Upon these propositions Clay made a two days' speech which was perhaps his greatest effort, though a dozen orations have been given that distinc-

tion. The Senate was crowded to hear him. The old man shook off his weight of years and spoke for hours with all the energy and abandon of youth, all the silvery tones of his manhood's prime, and all that depth of devotion to the Union which was the guiding star of his life. Almost half a century before he had entered the Senate, the youngest man who ever sat in that body. Now in his age he was beseeching the people once more to compose their differences and live in peace. His eyes gleamed with unnatural fire, his lips seemed touched as with coals from the altar. Men wept as he begged and pleaded with them, and when he concluded women rushed in and smothered him with caresses and kisses. This was one of the most effective speeches ever made in the chamber. It brought over to his side many who wavered and who in the end made up a majority. It seemed as if the physician had at last been found to heal the wounds and men's hearts were beating lighter, even if there were misgivings over the value of the plan.

Benton was not in the least deceived. He saw there was an element that desired secession and would be satisfied with nothing short of this unless given complete control of the government in perpetuity. He believed the Compromises would not

satisfy any party in interest and was convinced that they would no sooner be put in operation than friction would result. In his first speech in reply to Clay he indulged in plain speaking and no little sarcasm. What he predicted came to pass and some of his words deserve to be remembered :

“ It is a bill of thirty-nine sections—forty, save one—an ominous number ; and which, with the two little bills which attend it, is called a compromise, and is pressed upon us as a remedy for the national calamities. Now, all this labor of the committee, and all this remedy, proceed upon the assumption that the people of the United States are in a miserable, distracted condition ; that it is their mission to relieve this national distress, and that these bills are the sovereign remedy for that purpose. Now, in my opinion, all this is a mistake, both as to the condition of the country, the mission of the committee, and the efficacy of their remedy. I do not believe in this misery, and distraction, and distress, and strife, of the people. On the contrary, I believe them to be very quiet at home, attending to their crops, such of them as do not mean to feed out of the public crib ; and that they would be perfectly happy if the politicians would only permit them to think so. I know of no distress in the

country, no misery, no strife, no distraction, none of those five gaping wounds of which the senator from Kentucky made enumeration on the five fingers of his left hand, and for the healing of which, all together, and all at once, and not one at a time, like the little Doctor Taylor, he has provided this capacious plaster in the shape of five old bills tacked together. I believe the senator and myself are alike, in this, that each of us has but five fingers on the left hand ; and that may account for the limitation of the wounds. When the fingers gave out, they gave out ; and if there had been five more fingers, there might have been more wounds—as many as fingers—and, toes also. I know nothing of all these ‘gaping wounds,’ nor of any distress in the country since we got rid of the Bank of the United States, and since we got possession of the gold currency. Since that time I have heard of no pecuniary or business distress, no rotten currency, no expansions and contractions, no deranged exchanges, no decline of public stocks, no laborers begging employment, no produce rotting upon the hands of the farmer, no property sacrificed at forced sales, no loss of confidence, no three per centum a month interest, no call for a bankrupt act. Never were the people—the business doing



and the working people—as well off as they are to-day. As for political distress, '*it is all in my eye.*' It is all among the politicians. Never were the political blessings of the country greater than at present: civil and religious liberty eminently enjoyed; life, liberty, and property protected; the North and the South returning to the old belief that they were made for each other; and peace and plenty reigning throughout the land. This is the condition of the country—happy in the extreme; and I listen with amazement to the recitals which I have heard on this floor of strife and contention, gaping wounds and streaming blood, distress and misery. My opposition to the extension of slavery dates further back than 1844—forty years further back; and as this is a suitable time for a general declaration, and a sort of general conscience delivery, I will say that my opposition to it dates from 1804, when I was a student at law in the state of Tennessee, and studied the subject of African slavery in an American book—a Virginia book—Tucker's edition of 'Blackstone's Commentaries.' And here I find the largest objection to the extension of slavery—to planting it in new regions where it does not now exist—bestowing it on those who have it not. The incurability of the

evil is the greatest objection to the extension of slavery. It is wrong for the legislator to inflict an evil which can be cured : how much more to inflict one that is incurable, and against the will of the people who are to endure it forever ! I quarrel with no one for supposing slavery a blessing : I deem it an evil : and would neither adopt it nor impose it on others. Yet I am a slaveholder, and among the few members of Congress who hold slaves in this District. The French proverb tells us that nothing is new but what has been forgotten. So of this objection to a large emancipation. Every one sees now that it is a question of races, involving consequences which go to the destruction of one or the other : it was seen fifty years ago, and the wisdom of Virginia balked at it then. It seems to be above human wisdom. But there is a wisdom above human ! and to that we must look. In the meantime, do not extend the evil."

It was a terrible blow to Benton that he could find few to agree with him. He complained that every one seemed blinded to the truth. When it came Calhoun's turn to give his support to the Compromises, Benton watched eagerly, for he felt that much depended on his exact position. Calhoun, now on the brink of the grave, was able

to appear in the Senate, but obliged to have a fellow Senator read the speech he had prepared. He sat like a disembodied spirit reviewing the deeds of the flesh as he watched the effect of his words on his audience. He evidently had little faith in the Compromises, but assented to them since he was at heart loyal to the Union, or professed to be so, and certainly did not desire war to come in his time. It was a dismal wail he poured forth, asserting that the South had been maltreated and misused and that before long self-preservation would demand a complete change of relations between the two sections.

Calhoun said in part :

“I have, Senators, believed from the first that the agitation of the subject of slavery would, if not prevented by some timely effective measure, end in disunion. The agitation has been permitted to proceed, with almost no attempt to resist it, until it has reached a period when it can no longer be disguised or denied that the Union is in danger.”

After diagnosing the danger and attributing all trouble to the agitation on the part of the North begun in 1835, when the abolition excitement first became prominent in New England, resulting in riots and Southern protests, he continued :

“It [the Union] cannot then be saved by eulogies on it, however splendid or numerous. The cry of ‘Union, Union, the glorious Union,’ can no more prevent disunion than the cry of ‘Health, health, glorious health,’ on the part of the physician can save a patient from dying.” And further on, as a reply to the President’s repetition of Washington’s farewell address, Calhoun said there was “nothing in his [Washington’s] history to deter us from seceding from the Union should it fail to fulfil the objects for which it was instituted.” Continuing, he said: “Indeed, as events are now moving, it will not require the South to secede to dissolve the Union.”

Benton was dismayed, for it proved to him what he had been asserting all along: that the Compromises were a hollow sham; that they did not satisfy the South, which felt that it had been giving up too much, and certainly would not satisfy the North, which thought it was being deprived of its rights. Benton went to see Calhoun to find out what was the new adjustment at which he had hinted, and discovered that it was nothing more or less than a scheme for the election of two presidents, one to be chosen by the free and the other by the slave states. No legislation then should be valid unless it be

signed by both of them. Benton felt that the old man must be in his dotage to make such an extraordinary proposal which never could have been adopted, and if it had been, would have broken down at the first trial. In a few days Calhoun was dead and his plan was never publicly advocated.

Webster now came forward to pledge his adherence to the Compromises. He had deliberated long before doing so, but considered them essential to the perpetuity of the Union, though he was obliged to violate some of his strongest principles and to belie much of his career. In his famous 7th of March speech he reached his political nadir. Where now that Olympian voice which spoke for the Union more than twenty years before? Where now that confidence in the people and the demand for "Liberty and Union, now and forever," as against the heresies of nullification? Alas, the godlike Webster had changed. He had become distrustful, and in his zeal for the Compromises he struck a blow at New England which horrified and pained the moral element beyond expression, calling forth from Whittier his famous poem entitled, "Ichabod."

Then other senators rose to speak. Each man seemed to feel that the Compromises were not ex-

actly what they should be and wished for something else, but most of the leaders were willing to make the trial.

Several times during the debate Benton came into angry collision with Clay over features of the bill. Clay charged that Benton had been opposed in the previous summer to the admission of California, or at least he had heard so. Benton set him right on this matter, but not until much bad temper had been exhibited on both sides. Clay accused Benton of trying to lecture him and denied that the Missourian was a fit preceptor or that he (Clay) could learn anything from him. The statement produced a laugh which calmed the perturbed spirits for a time. Both men were imperious, dogmatic and in dead earnest. Clay could not forgive Benton his victory in the matter of the bank and Benton could not but have been envious of the wonderful persuasive powers and the eloquence possessed by Clay.

Later in the debate a more serious encounter occurred. Foote, of Mississippi, though Northern born, was the greatest fire-eater in the South. He was a small, swaggering man, who made a great deal of noise in debate and displayed a spirit of bravado that disgusted nearly every one in the Senate.

He carried a pistol, and on one occasion when he was having a warm altercation with Benton the latter advanced toward him. Foote believed, or pretended to believe, that he saw Benton put his hand in his pocket, and thereupon drew his loaded weapon on the Missourian. This was the greatest indignity the Senate had ever known and a tremendous *furor* ensued. Benton demanded that the coward shoot, asserting that he was not afraid of braggarts. He was greatly excited, perhaps unnecessarily so, but the conduct of Foote was despicable and Benton was determined not to show the white feather. Foote was compelled to apologize, but Benton never forgot the insult.

Curiously enough, once more under a Whig administration, Benton was the chief supporter of the President. Taylor had set his face against the Compromises and urged his friends to stand firm on the subject. Benton had no particular love for Taylor as an individual, but greatly admired the patriotic stand he had taken and in this case he was supporting him against the leaders of his own party. Benton's political orphanage was now complete. All this time California was waiting and found little consolation in the fact that all the sins of omission and commission on the subject of

slavery as viewed by North and South were to be loaded on her back. Frémont chafed because his term was short and in the end he served only a few days. In Benton's attempt to save the Union by defending the laws, his warmest ally was Houston, who went as much contrary to the wishes of the Texans, as Benton did to those of the Missourians. Houston was a man of much the same calibre as Benton and they were the warmest friends. Even in these days when Houston wrote to Benton he always signed himself "your friend and subaltern."

To perfect the bill, Clay had secured a grand committee of the Senate of thirteen members, representing numerically but not otherwise the original thirteen states. They reported the measure which was intolerably long and contained all of Clay's "plasters." It soon developed that while a majority favored compromise, the bill could not pass and even if it did, it seemed certain that Taylor would veto it. That contingency was removed by his sudden death, which for a time caused the suspension of all business. Fillmore, who became President, was agreeable to the Compromises and the debate continued. When the voting began the sections one after another were



rejected until there was nothing left but a bill for the erection of a territorial government in Utah. Clay's work seemed a failure and the old man retired in disgust to the seashore where he endeavored to compose his mind over the disaster.

Benton had early observed that the bills could pass separately if not joined together, and that was the plan finally adopted. California was admitted under her constitution by a decisive vote. Ten senators immediately offered a protest which they wished to have placed on the journal. This paper expressed disapprobation of what had been done and predicted that the country would soon be dismembered if the Senate persisted in such legislation. The chief grievance of the protesters was that California had not been divided on the Missouri Compromise line and the southern half given to the slavery-men.

Benton immediately attacked not only the matter of the protest but the proposal to spread it on the records. He now had the Southerners in a corner. For years Calhoun had been contending that slavery was a national institution concerning which Congress had no right to legislate; that it must exist in all national territory and when statehood was reached the people could choose for themselves,

whether they would have it or not. He evidently forgot that he himself in his earlier years had admitted the power of Congress to act in the matter and that he had on many occasions in the Senate and in the cabinet advocated this view. If he had not forgotten it, he ignored his former position and had now educated a new school to his later beliefs. And here were his disciples complaining that Congress had not done the very thing they had so strenuously asserted it had no power to do. Davis had announced early in the debate that slavery was supported by the laws of God and man and was sanctioned by the Bible ; that he would take the Missouri Compromise line to the Pacific and not an inch less. He was obliged to take less but he signed the protest which was nothing else than a threat to break up the Union.

Benton's speech was in part against the legality of such a protest and in it he gave the Senate the benefit of his erudition, quoting copiously from ancient precedents and citing the uniform practice of the British House of Lords. When he came to a denunciation of that portion of the paper which contained a threat of disunion he rose to heights of real eloquence. Benton said in part :

“It is afflicting enough to witness such things

out of doors ; but to enter a solemn protest on our journals, looking to the contingent dissolution of the Union, and that for our own acts—for the acts of a majority—to call upon us of the majority to receive our own indictment, and enter it, without answer, upon our own journals—is certainly going beyond all the other signs of the times, and taking a most alarming step in the progress which seems to be making in leading to a dreadful catastrophe. ‘*Dissolution*’ to be entered on our journal ! What would our ancestors have thought of it ? The paper contains an enumeration of what it characterizes as unconstitutional, unjust, and oppressive conduct on the part of Congress against the South, which, if persisted in, must lead to a dissolution of the Union, and names the admission of California as one of the worst of these measures. I cannot consent to place that paper on our journals. I protest against it—protest in the name of my constituents. I have made a stand against it. It took me by surprise ; but my spirit rose and fought. I deem it my sacred duty to resist it—to resist the entrance upon our journal of a paper hypothetically justifying disunion. If defeated, and the paper goes on the journal, I still wish the present age and posterity to see that it was not

without a struggle—not without a stand against the portentous measure—a stand which should mark one of those eras in the history of nations from which calamitous events flow.”

The protest was not received. It must have been a malicious joy to Benton that Atchison, his colleague in the Senate, who opposed him in all matters concerning the extension of slavery, had signed the paper and was not allowed to see it go on record.

The next bill in the group to receive serious consideration was the fugitive slave act. Benton's plan was to make a few amendments to the existing law in order to give jurisdiction to the federal authorities; but the radicals insisted on a new law and in the end it satisfied no one, as in fact such a measure could not under the conditions which then existed and which were presently to become so much worse. Benton made an effort to have the bill perfected but it failed to suit him and he did not vote for or against it, in which position he was joined by twenty other senators.

The rest of the compromise bills passed without much trouble and were signed by the Whig president who thereby made his renomination impossible.

This practically ended Benton's career in the Senate. During the next short session which closed

his term, little of importance was done but already he had seen enough signs to know that the Compromises were not worthy of the name and that they were certain to fail in establishing that permanent basis of peace which their authors fondly believed they would. He derided them as no compromises at all but surrenders, and insisted that disunion was coming unless the people would arouse themselves to the gravity of the situation. He found little consolation anywhere. His was a voice crying in the wilderness and when he left the Senate it was with a feeling of despondency that grew as he saw the plans of the South develop.

## CHAPTER XIII

### MISSOURI REPUDIATES BENTON

THERE is one more act of Benton's life in Congress to which attention must be particularly directed. No sooner had California fallen into our hands, owing largely to his son-in-law's aggressive action, an event which he said would have occurred regardless of the Mexican War, than Benton began planning for transportation facilities. Though a foe of marine subsidies, he saw that here was a case in which federal aid must be given. He was largely responsible for establishing the pony express which at first was looked upon as a chimera ; then the telegraph line ; and still more important the railway running directly to the coast, of which idea he was the real originator. This scheme was too large for the people and many of his best friends used to sigh mournfully and lament his declining intellectual powers. It was regretted, too, that his great career was to be blighted by his continual advocacy of a project which was deemed too ridiculous for

consideration—and this within twenty years of the completion of the line.

Indeed, if we consider the character of the opposition he met at the time, it would seem that he was looked upon as a mountebank. During his first term in the Senate things were said concerning his attitude which would have deeply wounded a less sensitive man. If a Senator to-day should announce that Alaska is destined to have a population of thirty millions and to become an important factor in American civilization, he would make far less of a sensation than did Benton eighty years ago. The statesmen at Washington looked upon him, not as a seer and prophet, but simply as one who desired to aggrandize the West at the expense of the rest of the country. All his talk about civilization west of the Rocky Mountains was considered rhodomontade for home consumption. They had found by experience that Benton had an astonishing way of opening the public purse for the benefit of his section, and they thought that he had a purely personal interest in the discussion. This was wrong. Although Benton as a rule had as little of the imaginative quality as any Senator, except when he allowed it to run riot through the classics, it is certain that he did foresee the future of the West as no

other man in the country. He was no wild enthusiast or selfish sectionalist ; he was a tireless student and a most intelligent observer of events. He had been studying the railway question since the first locomotive was used. He had been thinking of the Pacific coast and fighting for it when most of his contemporaries were wearied at the very mention of the subject and devoutly wished that Oregon and Benton were at the bottom of the Pacific. At a time when there were no diplomatic relations between this country and the Far East, and when we had only claims to Oregon and not a port on the Pacific, he had the courage to direct the minds of the people to that section and, while pointing westward, to make the statement which sounded so visionary in the ears of his hearers :

“There is the East : there is the road to India.”

It is difficult to say when the thought of a trans-continental railway first publicly appeared, but it did not assume a definite form until after the Mexican War, when we gained so much new territory and discovered that it was rich in gold. Then the subject was talked about with enthusiasm but with very little practical sense. Indeed for some years it was believed to be impossible to surmount the Rockies, and the Gadsden purchase of a strip along



the New Mexico-Arizona border was made simply to provide a route for a railroad below the mountain ranges.

It was not long, however, before engineers insisted that a road could be built straight across the country and Benton was one of the first to be converted to that view. He was anxious to get at the exact facts, and in the end he knew more about the subject than any one else. From his son-in-law, Frémont, he learned a great deal concerning the topographical features of the country and he was the first to insist that the route should be to the North, following the path of the buffalo. He said that the buffalo was the best engineer, because he found that the great herds when going North for the winter crossed the upper passes, following the line of least resistance, and he insisted that their route be followed. If his advice had been taken millions which have since been expended in rectifying early mistakes might have been saved.

Benton never believed in direct government aid for the railroad. His idea was that a land grant would be sufficient, and in his day indeed there was little thought of construction on any other terms. He proposed to give the road a liberal right of way and his first speech on the subject dealt with the

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value of the grant to the building corporation. As a matter of fact, this scheme was chimerical and the road was never built until the nation had furnished practically all the funds in addition to a much more liberal land grant than Benton had suggested, and thirty years elapsed after the completion of the work before the government's money was repaid.

Benton took a natural course in all the debates which preceded construction. There were many interests to be conserved. Chicago wished whatever trade advantages might come from the construction of the line, while Benton was naturally anxious that St. Louis should maintain its supremacy. It happened in the end that no government aid was extended to a road on the eastern side of the Missouri and the terminus was fixed at Omaha; but not until Benton had done his best in behalf of St. Louis and had pointed out that at the mouth of the Kaw would be built one of the greatest cities in the country, a prediction which Kansas City to-day verifies.

Benton went into the railroad question with that determination and energy which characterized him in all emergencies in his career. He talked repeatedly to the Senate and to any individual who would listen to him. He spoke in St. Louis and

other parts of Missouri on the subject. There is some reason for believing that he hoped to turn the thoughts of the people from slavery and allied questions to that of Western expansion, but in this he failed.

If it be asked exactly what Benton accomplished in legislating for the transcontinental railway, the answer may do him grave injustice. He introduced many bills looking to surveys and government aid and spoke often on the subject. It can be fairly stated that he was responsible for the first surveys, though he left the Senate before anything of importance was accomplished.

His speeches on this subject are entertaining. They are florid, and full of what he considered poetic fancy and prophecy, but one can see that he understood the coming glories of the far West better than any of his contemporaries, and if the American people forgot much of his language, they at least remembered his general position. When after the war the government took up the subject earnestly, nearly every speaker in Congress referred again and again to his words. It was laid up against him, it is true, that the route of the buffalo which he proposed was not feasible, since it ran through a country where there was too much

winter. Benton had sharply criticised the engineers who had selected the central route, declaring, as proved true, that it crossed a wilderness of alkali beds, while his own was not only through the best country in the West, but led directly to the port that was certain to become a great station on the road to China. Even at a much later day it was said that no wheat could be raised in the latitude of the Dakotas as it was too far north, a statement that sounds strange in face of the fact that millions of acres are being bought by Americans much farther north in Canada and a transcontinental railway is being constructed still nearer the Arctic Circle than the Canadian Pacific. Here was another example of the fact that Benton had studied actual conditions and knew whereof he spoke, while others who hastily glanced at the subject called him a dreamer of wild and mystical views.

It was during the Mexican War that he found the sentiment of Missouri drifting farther and farther away from him, and into the control of the nullifiers and the disciples of Calhoun who were soon to become open secessionists. Atchison, his colleague, had become the dominant power in the state. They differed radically on every point connected with the slavery question, and met each

other in Missouri as the leaders of two distinctly antagonistic factions.

The crisis came when Claiborne F. Jackson (later the governor who tried to carry the state into secession) offered in the state senate a set of resolutions which declared slavery to be a national institution. In effect they were an endorsement of nullification and of secession, having no other purport than to prepare the people of Missouri for the separation that was already contemplated. These resolutions were passed and became the dominating issue in state politics. They were practically of the same tenor as the resolutions which Calhoun had offered in the United States Senate not long before and which Benton had opposed with all the earnestness of his nature. Calhoun seemed to be surprised at this opposition and said he had expected Benton, coming as he did from a slaveholding state, to support the resolutions. Benton replied that it was impossible for Calhoun to have expected anything of the sort. "Then," said Calhoun, "I shall know where to find the gentleman." To which Benton replied in words that ought to be upon his tombstone :

"I shall be found in the right place—on the side of my country and the Union."

These so-called Resolutions of 1847 did not pass the Senate but they formed a kind of Magna Charta for the secessionists and it was of them that Benton remarked :

“As Sylla saw in the young Cæsar many Mariuses, so do I see in the Calhoun resolutions many nullifications.”

Benton took the stump in Missouri against the Claiborne Jackson resolutions. He denounced nullification and secession and was firm for the preservation of the Union at any cost. When the elections were over, it was found that the legislature was divided into three tolerably equal groups : Bentonians, anti-Bentonians (both Democratic factions) and Whigs. The contest for the senatorship was long and stubborn. The two wings of the Democracy fought each other more bitterly than they did the Whigs, and in the end members of both factions voted for Geyer, the Whig candidate, and elected him.

Benton did not consider this defeat irretrievable. He had no notion of giving up public life and believed that in the next contest he could regain his seat, in which opinion he was mistaken. He took ill-fortune philosophically and was soon elected to represent a St. Louis district in the House, though

he failed of re-election because he would not make terms with the Know Nothings who were then active factors in politics. Benton did not believe in their policies or their methods and once more faced defeat rather than compromise his own views. In fact, by this time Benton was scarcely a Missourian. He had been in the state very little in the last ten years of his service in the Senate and had gotten out of touch with the people. The rising generation had not the reverence or respect for him that their fathers had had.

Benton was sadly missed in the Senate. Indeed he had been there so long that it seemed impossible there could be a Senate without him. Even those who had been most bitter in their denunciation of him and his views, greatly regretted the turn of fate which lost him the seat he had so highly honored. Like many other men he was most appreciated when he was gone. He was a mainstay for many of the Senators. He would do the work for them with alacrity. If any difficult task, involving great research, were necessary, the more indolent members cheerfully left it to Benton, who never failed them and whose reports had the authority of law.

Missouri never dishonored herself so much as in

dispensing with the services of her greatest citizen, a fact which she understood when it was too late. Benton could not have prevented the war. His work was done. But he could have been of great assistance in the trying days before Sumter fell, and there is little reason to doubt that he would have survived until that period had Missouri continued to delight to honor him.

One of his last official duties in the Senate was to welcome the young Sumner, who had been chosen from Massachusetts as a Free Soiler. Benton warmly grasped the young man's hand, but assured him that he had come to the Senate too late. All the great issues and all the great men were gone; there was nothing left but snarling over slavery, and no chance whatever for a career. There seems a little of the spirit of bravado, and perhaps a tinge of bitterness, about this, coming as it did when he was just passing off the stage.<sup>1</sup>

His single term in the House of Representatives was notable because of the fight he conducted unavailingly against the repeal of the Missouri Compromise. If he was committed to one thing more than another, it was this Compromise, to effect which he had done so much just before his en-

<sup>1</sup> Blaine's "Twenty Years in Congress."



trance to the Senate, and which he had striven to maintain during the remainder of his life. It was in the first flush of Democratic triumph after the election of Pierce and the defeat of Scott and the Whig party that the repeal of the Missouri Compromise was determined upon. For many facts here given the writer is indebted to several informants who were in Washington at the time, and who were not only Benton's personal friends, but constant witnesses of the scenes which were enacted in those stormy days.

When the motion was introduced, Benton raged like a lion. He was easily the most conspicuous man in the House. Now well past seventy, his leonine form made an impression not only upon visitors but upon members of all parties. He was particularly careful of his dress and loved the admiration that was unsparingly bestowed upon him. He still expected to return to the Senate, and looked upon his experience in the lower House as a rather amusing incident in his career. Whenever it was known that Benton would speak—and he spoke often—the galleries were crowded. With a voice growing weak with age, but with energy unabated, the old parliamentary warrior fought to the last. He even exaggerated some of his manner-

isms and in fact almost essayed the rôle of an actor as he raged up and down the aisles, or paced the open space in front of the speaker's desk. In these later years his wit was more acute, his humor more genial. Regardless of party affiliations, the members gathered around to hear him. Some of them had not been born when the Missouri Compromise was passed. Most of those reckoned to be his contemporaries were boys in school when he was already a Senator. He was wont to emphasize this fact, and it made him none the less popular. Members applauded him to the echo, laughed at his wit, turned pale under his invective—for on the matter of the repeal, his language was vitriolic and his denunciation terrible.

Now that the members of the triumvirate were all dead, Benton was considered the most remarkable man in either branch of Congress, and had he for a moment bowed the knee to Baal, he still might have died in harness. But he was as implacable toward the Know Nothings who ended his career in the House as toward the pro-Southern men who unseated him in the Senate, and so he lost his office. This would have discouraged most other men, but Benton resolved on one last effort. He still believed that Missouri would be true to the Union and in

1856 ran for governor on an independent Democratic ticket. In spite of his great age and declining health, he made a tremendously active campaign, speaking in every section of the state, sounding aloud his doctrines of loyalty to the Union and denouncing nullifiers and secessionists unsparingly. It was in vain; the people no longer knew his voice or heeded it.

Thus ended the political career of Thomas H. Benton. No more independent spirit ever sat in the Congress of the United States, none that was truer to duty and none having in general a better comprehension of public affairs.

## CHAPTER XIV

### FRIENDSHIPS AND CHARACTERISTICS

IN spite of his long public life, Benton was not a man of many warm friendships. His austerity of life, his devotion to study and in the latter part of his career, his wife's illness, kept him from that close touch with men which others of his day enjoyed. Moreover he had an independence of spirit which, joined to his vanity, made him unapproachable except after long acquaintance. In the latter part of his life, when old friends were gone, he made few new ones, though maintaining an air of affability toward all.

In the beginning of his career he seems to have been drawn close to John Randolph, of Roanoke, on the basis probably that difference in characteristics leads to mutual appreciation. The most brilliant part of Randolph's career had passed before Benton came on the stage, but the old man seemed so much drawn to the younger one that, as we have seen, he desired Benton to second him in the duel with Clay, though their acquaintance must have been brief. It was becoming more and more evident to all that

there were times when Randolph was mentally unbalanced and on the occasion of a personal call, Benton resolved to sound him to see if he had any suspicion of such a thing. Randolph was very fond of quoting a quatrain dealing with imbecility and Benton asked him if the lines could possibly have any application to himself. The elder replied: "I have lived in dread of insanity." This was enough to give Benton a cue to what he had long suspected of the man of whom it was said on one occasion: "He has wasted enough intellectual jewelry this evening to equip many speakers for great orations."

Notwithstanding the political differences between himself and Rufus King, last of the original Federalists, Benton greatly admired him. He thought that he paid much more attention to the aged man's advice than his career indicates. Benton was attached to the old social order and though he always voted against the Federalists he seems to have greatly respected many of them. Another subject of his admiration was Macon, "the last of the Romans," whose career was perhaps the longest of any man who ever sat in Congress. Jefferson Benton met but once, when he went to Monticello for the purpose, coming away with an enlarged opinion of the man. On that occasion they were dis-

cussing internal improvements and Benton was asking advice about a survey for a road through Georgia to Louisiana. Jefferson told him that such a survey had been made and indicated where in Washington he would find a map of it. On returning, Benton found it just where Jefferson had said it was, with the result that a large expense and much time was saved to the government.

Though professing to accept the political philosophy of Jefferson, Benton deviated from it very widely. It would be more correct to say that he was a Jacksonian in politics, though he would have preferred the statement that Jackson was a Bentonian. The intimacy between these two leaders of the new Democracy was not so close as one might imagine. Benton was no sycophant, seldom went to the White House unless asked to do so and though he fought Jackson's battles, it was not so much because they were Jackson's as because he made them his own. It appears that they did not confer very freely on public matters,—not so much as Benton would have desired at some times ; but this was probably due to the temperaments of the two men. Benton could not belong to any man's "Kitchen Cabinet" and when he acted in emergencies it was largely on his own initiative. He fought for years

for the expunging act and his victory touched "Old Hickory" deeply; but he seldom sent for Benton to consult him on public matters of grave importance, and apparently never showed him his annual messages before forwarding them to Congress, since Benton frequently mentions the omission.

Benton did not care for mere show of power. He desired the power itself and this he exercised on the floor of the Senate. He was many times offered cabinet positions by Jackson and other presidents but, though he would have made an excellent executive officer, he constantly refused. Even when the presidency was dangled before his eyes he declined to consider himself in connection with the office. He seldom attended public dinners, which were more of an institution then than now. Clay delighted to be dined and to be called upon to speak. Benton usually declined in a letter which expressed his views with more force than good diction. His aversion to attentions of this kind was proverbial and this trait served to estrange him sometimes from those whom he might better have sought to propitiate.

His relations with the members of the triumvirate varied from time to time. Sometimes he was on terms of the warmest intimacy with Clay and his

family. There had been an estrangement between them for a while previous to the duel with Randolph, and the night before the meeting Benton went to see Clay in the hope that something might arise to make an accommodation possible. Clay received him kindly and in the presence of his family they discussed matters of general import, but no opening came as Benton had hoped, and he went to his home saddened over the prospect of seeing Clay fall the next day.

When the fight over the bank came on, Benton and Clay exchanged many bitter words and at times came almost to blows; but after Clay made his so-called farewell speech in 1842, there was a restoration of good feeling. That speech was one of the most notable in the annals of the Senate and at its conclusion many members were in tears. Benton dryly remarked that he thought there was only one man in the world who could successfully make such a demonstration and he hoped none would attempt to repeat it unless a second Henry Clay appeared, of which he was skeptical.

At first he was on terms of friendship with Calhoun and had a great admiration for his abilities as well as for those of Hayne. He did not understand the drift of the coalition which these two



Carolínians were trying to effect between the West and the South, and it was long before his eyes were opened. As soon as he discovered the nullification plans of Calhoun, he broke with him politically and personally except for the most formal recognition.

With Webster he seems always to have been friendly. There were times when the members of the triumvirate, though working together, were not on speaking terms with one another and must therefore conduct negotiations through an outside party. Sometimes Benton was the emissary, though opposed as a rule to their course.

For Van Buren he appears to have had the warmest affection of his career. They were long together in the Senate and when Van Buren was Vice-president, Benton was very close in his intimacy, which was finally broken by Van Buren's repulse of him just before his inauguration as president. Their unhappy relations were not of long continuance, however, and they soon became warm friends once more. Benton was greatly disappointed when Van Buren was defeated for the nomination of 1844, but when he was chosen as a presidential candidate by the Free Soil Democracy in 1848, would not support him, as he did not believe in a

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political party formed for the agitation of the slavery question.

For twenty-five years Benton was more or less in contact with John Quincy Adams who opposed pretty nearly every measure which he supported ; yet when Adams died Benton was one of the two men in the Senate selected to deliver a eulogy upon him. On such occasions Benton was always at his best. He was a man of deep sentiment and at these times it overflowed. He was in many respects like Adams in the purity of his life, devotion to duty and the freedom of his career from scandal ; but intellectually the men were of different types. Benton made a brief address on Adams's career, which was one of the best ever given, showing how the man of blood and iron could appreciate the scholar and the gentleman.

One of his earliest friends was Hugh L. White, of Tennessee, from whom Benton received his law license. White was one of the extraordinary men of his time, being second in ability to hardly any man in the country. When Benton was a member of the legislature of Tennessee he succeeded in having passed a bill to rearrange the judiciary of the state on a modern basis. The question of the chief justiceship was one which gave party leaders

no little concern. All desired White but feared he would not accept it, as he had already refused pretty nearly every gift the people could offer and was only in the beginning of his career. Upon Benton's going to him he secured his consent, and he was elected without opposition. For many years White and Jackson were close friends and when the former came to the Senate he was warmly received by his early pupil. Benton soon found, however, that his friend was not an unalloyed supporter of Jackson and in the fight for the expunging resolution White was aligned against him. Finally the legislature ordered White to vote for the resolution and he resigned rather than do so, becoming a candidate for the presidency against Van Buren in 1836. Benton alleges that this mistake of his life was due to the fact that he had just married a new wife, who had been a boarding-house keeper and, having social ambitions, now wished to be mistress of the White House. When White was defeated his wife was distressed beyond measure, while he himself was much chagrined and died, as Benton believed, of disappointment.

With Buchanan he had had friendly relations for many years though not always one of his warm admirers. In 1856 when he supported him, as

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against his own son-in-law, not one word was said in derogation of Benton's conduct because of his known fidelity to principle. Such an exhibition is almost unparalleled in American politics yet it was consistent with Benton's whole course through life. He may have been wrong in his judgments on some occasions but he never hesitated to follow his convictions no matter where they led him. At an interesting point in his career he was badly needed on the stump in Missouri. His aged mother was then very feeble and her death was expected at any moment. He declined to make speeches or to take any other part in politics during the whole summer. It is gratifying to note that this filial duty was rewarded, for in spite of his absence, the elections resulted as he wished.

Considering how uxorious he was, how fond of the family circle and how passionately he loved his children, it is difficult to understand his devotion to the dueling code. This was another exhibition of his Roman firmness, for although he refused to accept or to issue challenges while in the Senate, believing it inconsistent with his duty, there is not the slightest reason to doubt that he would have done so under other circumstances, and have gone to the field with composure, even if he knew that

he were to fall and leave his wife and four beautiful daughters unprotected. His was the character of a Curtius or a Jephtha. Even when the Graves-Cilley duel<sup>1</sup> made it apparent that something must be done to stop the practice Benton was not satisfied with the law that was passed. He hated dueling even if he had killed his man at ten feet, but he believed that there was no substitute for it to keep men up to the highest standards of honor. He thought that the use of the bowie-knife and the revolver, which became very frequent as the contest over slavery grew more bitter, was due to the fact that dueling had been made a crime; he therefore was not satisfied to see the code abolished.

He was so high an authority on the subject that his opinion was frequently invoked when affairs of

<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Cilley, of Maine, and William J. Graves, of Kentucky, both members of Congress, fought a duel in 1838, at Bladensburg (near Washington), under peculiar circumstances. James Watson Webb, a New York editor, commented severely upon a speech by Cilley, and eventually sent the latter a challenge by the hand of Graves. Cilley declined and in the end Graves made the quarrel his own, challenged and was accepted. Rifles were used and at the third fire Cilley was killed. From start to finish it was considered that the duel was one of extraordinary atrocity. It of course could not have taken place under normal ethical conditions; even under the code the affair should have been accommodated without loss of honor to those concerned and it never should have proceeded under any circumstances beyond the first exchange of shots. As a result a very severe law was passed which it was expected would suppress dueling at Washington.

honor were to be fought and sometimes he was able to compose them. One of the last acts of his life was to settle a dispute for James B. Clay, a son of Henry and then a member of the House, who was involved in an affair with a member from New York. A meeting seemed inevitable. This was deplored by every one because the death of either combatant would certainly result in a still further inflaming of the people on the subject of slavery. In this dilemma it was finally arranged that Benton should act as arbiter and after careful consideration he gave it as his opinion that under the code there could be no meeting. The principals and their friends acquiesced, as did also the public, though nothing less than Benton's great authority could have accomplished the happy result.

It has seldom happened in a career so long as his that no charge of inconsistency could be brought against him. That is not the highest tribute, as many great men have radically changed their views without losing public respect; but in Benton's case there was no change. He was always for sound money and against the bank; always for cheap lands and against distributing the surplus among the states; always against lavish appropriations for internal improvements; always against slavery ex-

tension or agitation ; and always unqualifiedly for the Union. When he saw Missouri drifting away from his position, he not only did not go with the tide, but he strenuously fought the secession spirit and in the end was willing that a Whig should succeed him, rather than one of the state-rights' Democrats of the Davis-Atchison school. And this was at a time when one word on his part would have kept him in the position he so much desired to hold. His was a sort of firmness not common in those days or since. Clay said that Benton had a hide like a hippopotamus, which was another way of saying he was inflexible. Clay had good reason to fear Benton, for though the latter was not to be compared with the former in originality of conception, brilliancy of execution or elegance of diction, yet in practically all their encounters the eventual result was that Benton won and Clay lost. If Clay's own skin had possessed more of the quality of the hippopotamus's, it might have been better for his success.

Benton's first great disappointment in life was over the failure of Congress to pass the bill creating the grade of lieutenant-general in the army so that he could go to Mexico and carry on the war. Why Benton should have wished to wear gold

braid and set squadrons in the field, unless he thought it would lead him to the White House, it is difficult to understand. Though he did map out the campaigns in the large, it was hardly to be expected that he could execute them with the promptness and thoroughness of Taylor or Scott; yet in his Memoirs he affects superiority to both. When his friends interfered and killed the bill as it neared final passage, Benton felt the blow keenly, but cherished no resentments over the matter.

When he grew older he used to be very fond of taking new senators by the hand and instructing them in the manners and customs of the chamber. He assumed a patronizing air but with great dignity. He was a very large and heavy man and his pompousness was so quaint that it was well received by the budding statesmen who in time found that Benton could be, and frequently was, of real service to them. He never failed to answer a request of the sort.

In getting a proper estimate of Benton's attitude toward society, it should be remembered that he was by birth and family connections an aristocrat while his early training and temperament had made him a man of the people. He owed his



name to the fact that his mother had grown up in the family of her uncle, Colonel Thomas Hart, who was the father of Mrs. Henry Clay. Colonel Hart was one of the wealthiest and most aristocratic men in America and the family connection always aided Benton. In his contact with equals Benton ever seemed a trifle arrogant: toward those whom he considered inferiors he was kind, even if occasionally condescending.

Although Benton professed to be a pronounced Democrat of the Jefferson school, in some things he was a Federalist. His father had been a Tory and he had grown up in Tennessee in a rude school but in later life he became more and more conservative in many of his views. Not only was he a great stickler for the decorum of the Senate, but on all occasions he was likely to be rather cold in his conversations with any but his intimates. Senator Rufus King gave him an idea that made a profound impression on his conduct. After Benton had delivered a speech in which he had inveighed against Great Britain and monarchies in general, King had a serious talk with the young man, explaining that such views were too radical. King had been born a subject of a British sovereign and had always professed loyalty up to the time of

the troubles just preceding the Revolution. He said it was a mistake to suppose that a man could not be loyal to a monarch and still have notions of individual and social liberty. This was in no disparagement of American democracy ; it was given as a fact which could not be ignored. Benton often thought of what King told him and it gave him a more liberal idea of European statesmen than he had previously held.

It seems hardly possible that Benton's narrow views on some questions could have been maintained had he lived much longer. He was an ardent believer in state-rights, but when the chief tenet of the Calhoun school became nullification, it met his instant and unyielding disapprobation ; yet as that was perhaps the legitimate result of the extreme views of the state-rights men, we may suppose that Benton would have found it difficult to say exactly where he drew the line. As he grew older and the younger school of Southern statesmen came on the stage, he found himself more and more isolated. By the time the Whig party was dead, he was really more of a Whig than a Democrat, but he could not become a Republican.

His views on slavery were those of many others

of his generation. Though hating the institution, he kept slaves even in the District of Columbia. One of the things that sank bitterly into his soul was the agreement of this country to maintain a squadron on the African coast to suppress the slave trade. He detested that trade but thought this government ought not to be called upon to do police work ; that Great Britain, which was responsible for the introduction of slavery into the United States, and had lately taken such an interest in abolishing it the world over, ought to carry the burden. Benton must have known that the trade was still flourishing, and that annually thousands of slaves were being smuggled into this country, but it was a part of his *laissez faire* policy to ignore real conditions and let the Southern people have their own way. This was impossible as he later found out to his cost.

At a time when the nation was fairly prosperous and the states were burdened with debt, an effort was made to have the Federal government assume all the debts of the states. Many of them had defaulted on their bonds and there was great indignation in Great Britain because of the losses to investors. Benton set his face resolutely against this idea and fought the measure to its death. He

believed, and rightly, that the precedent would be an evil one ; that the payment of state debts by Hamilton was purely for expenses incurred in the war of the Revolution and was in no sense on a par with the present proposal. He opposed all such jobbery and all sorts of extravagance angered him, while as a foe of monopoly he would have been terrified at many things which have happened since his day. ;

He kept his financial affairs to himself, but he appears to have used up most of his substance by the time he died. It is a little strange considering his opportunities that he never made more effort to accumulate property. While he had worked hard in youth and the family had comparatively little ready money, they had a good deal of property, and he might have gained much if his ambitions had been in that direction. Apparently he was very generous toward his brothers and sisters, who probably received more than their shares of the estate. He left the plantation in early manhood, first, for the army, which did not bring him the fame he sought, and then for the law in which he was more successful. It was usual in those days for the sons who received an education to be content with that, which may be the reason that when he reached St.

Louis he had only four hundred dollars in his pocket, though that was a much larger capital than the same sum would be esteemed in these days. He occasionally bemoaned the fact that he had not more money to invest in lands in the West, which he was certain would be very valuable in the near future. His son-in-law, Frémont, was at one time thought to be a millionaire mine owner, but the mines contained little or no gold. His favorite daughter, Mrs. Frémont, spent her last years in absolute poverty, being supported by the quiet benefactions of friends who deceived her in thinking the money came from some old investments. From her father she appears to have received nothing.

In his dealings in financial matters Benton was exceedingly conscientious. He abhorred debt and, as we have seen, desired that good money only be used. At one time he refused to take his senatorial pay in notes, though they were perfectly good, and insisted on "the hard or a protest," which he wrote across the face of the draft. He did protest and the matter was settled so that he actually got the gold, but the incident was not very forceful as a precedent until after his whole plan of specie payments had been worked out.

Benton's religious sentiments were very deep and

he was a constant attendant on public worship. He was orthodox in his views and was a great student of the Bible, which he revered. When in anger, according to a very peculiar habit of the time, he would swear "like a trooper," but the practice was never laid up against him.

It has already been mentioned that in youth he was something of a musician and throughout his life was fond of singing. His daughters were educated with great care and on Sunday evenings he delighted to hear them sing and sometimes joined them at the piano. He went to concerts until his wife was taken ill, and after her death he seems only once to have revoked his rule about going to public amusements when Jenny Lind visited Washington. Outside of music he exhibited little fondness for the fine arts and had almost no recreation, except horseback riding, of which he was very fond. In Washington he rode about on a spirited black charger, proud of the sensation his appearance created. On these occasions he was likely to be accompanied by a granddaughter.

In his family life he was exceedingly happy and few public men have ever spent so much time at home. His affection for every member of his family amounted almost to a passion. He fairly

worshiped his wife and daughters and no sacrifice for them was too great. Considering how arrogant he could be, how stubborn he always was, and how passionate in early life, his conduct in the family circle was remarkable and all that the most capricious could desire. During his wife's long illness he showed a tenderness and chivalry toward her on all occasions that was generally and favorably commented upon.

Their family life was clouded not only by her long illness, but by the death of their two sons early in life. Both of these were lads of promise, whom the Senator expected would wear his mantle. The eldest, Randolph, was named for his father's friend; the younger, James McDowell, named for his grandfather, is said to have had an unusually sweet disposition and his death almost broke the Senator's heart. It has been said elsewhere that his favorite daughter married against his wishes and the same is reported of her sisters. Of these, Eliza married William Carey Jones; Sarah, Richard Taylor Jacob; and Susan, Baron Gaudree Boileau, of the French Legation. In his old age Benton found much comfort in his grandchildren, of whom there were many. None of his domestic afflictions were brought to public atten-

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tion, and he never complained, though they were as iron to his soul. It was a peculiarly hard fate that one who abjured all of that public social intercourse, so common in his day, should be denied in the home he loved so much the highest measure of domestic bliss. He gave small dinners to intimates, which were highly esteemed, but his hospitality was not lavish, both because he did not enjoy that sort of thing and because he could not afford it. Much of the time his wife could not preside at the table, and on some occasions when she did her husband had to do practically all the honors, yet never with the slightest embarrassment. He had a colored cook who was famous for her skill and in his later years to have dined at Benton's was considered a high honor by the younger men in Congress, who had come to look upon him as a sage.

Benton was in Washington at the time of his brother Jesse's encounter with Carroll, which led to the Jackson imbroglio and he at once flared into a heat of passion, becoming an uncompromising partisan of his brother without waiting to hear what his old chief and friend, General Jackson, had to say about the matter. When the encounter came he rushed into it in a spirit



more befitting a Highland Scottish chief of the sixteenth century than a lawyer and legislator of the nineteenth. His affection for Jesse continued through life, though the latter seems to have been a man of much smaller calibre. Benton at one time even relaxed in his determination never to ask office for his family so far as to endorse a nephew's claims, though apparently he did not make the original application.

He was always ready to talk about health to any one who would listen to his views, and seeing how he had been snatched practically from the jaws of the grave by his own severe regimen, he had some reason for the faith in his practice. He was daily rubbed down by a negro servant with a horse brush, which would have almost made a Spartan quail. He began this in youth when fleeing from consumption and kept it up until the end, although it must have taken a very stoical mind to submit to its tortures. It has been noted that he lived an abstemious life at his mother's request, and when she died it was a terrible sorrow to him, though she was then very old.

In his heart he was generous, and almost too confiding for his own good. Any injustice made him boil with indignation. When two of the

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officers of the *Somers* were hanged at the yard-arm for alleged mutiny, one of them being Spencer, son of the Secretary of the Navy, Benton spent months investigating the evidence, and his opinion was that no mutiny was intended and that the court-martial of the officers was conducted not to get at the truth but to protect the offenders.

As he fell farther and farther away from his party he lost the respect of none. He would have nothing to do with Anti-Masonry or Know Nothingism, and it was the followers of the latter idea who were finally responsible for his overthrow. He made a constant and unavailing effort his life long to confine national political discussion and action to a narrow range of subjects which he deemed constitutional. He was not enough of a seer to perceive that this was impossible. He could not understand the temper of the times and when anti-slavery ideas began to be injected into politics he was out of his element, though always the most upright and moral of men.

Much comment has been made by historians as to Benton's inflexibility on public questions and his refusal in defeat to acknowledge error. They seem to think that his long arguments on the constitutionality of public questions smelled more of the

lamp of the student than of a broad acquaintance with the Constitution or the exact conditions of public policy. It is true that many of his speeches are very difficult reading in these days, but one must look at them in the spirit of the time in which they were uttered. His opposition to the bank as unconstitutional, in the face of a Supreme Court decision upholding it, is by some laid up against him. This is unfair. The bank which he fought was not the institution of Hamilton which had been under review by the courts, and in any event there were circumstances which made it entirely proper for him as a legislator to hold to his view. He had been hostile to the institution from the very beginning, and it is believed that he had much to do with finally forming Jackson's opinions on the subject. It is true that Jackson had always been opposed to the bank which in the West was esteemed an odious monopoly; but what Jackson thought as a private citizen and what course he would take as President were different considerations. Historians have threshed over an immense amount of straw to try to prove that Jackson came to Washington ready to smite this Apollyon, but the evidence is at least inconclusive. In a brief time he did go into opposition, but this was partly due to the place

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held by the bank people in partisan politics and also to the influence of Benton, whose views on finance were generally correct, and who was in this particular more than usually well acquainted with actual economic conditions. What Benton saw most clearly was that the West was growing with enormous rapidity under the stimulus of cheap and fertile lands. In his day, when civilization was less complex and the natural resources of the country proportionately larger, it was much easier than now for an energetic, frugal set of farmers to achieve what was considered a competency. And because they did get along so well with so little money, Benton adjusted many of his theories in finance to their situation.

It has been previously stated that Benton was not a man of vivid imagination. In one respect this view must be modified. He saw more clearly than any of his contemporaries the future of the great Northwest, and his imagination ran riot in his efforts to paint its glowing prospects. After eliminating his quotations from Horace and some rather involved efforts at apotheosis, we find that he had a pretty correct view of the potentialities not only of the West of his day but of the far West and Northwest, and the far East.

In his many speeches on the land question or the Oregon boundary, he constantly referred to that great section beyond the Rocky Mountains which even then was beckoning. And though in the very interesting life of Marcus Whitman, who did so much to save Oregon, we find that it was Benton's colleague, Dr. Linn, who introduced Whitman to President Tyler, thus securing a temporary reversal of the administration's policy in regard to Oregon, it seems very likely that Benton was his sponsor in this affair.

Whitman arrived in Washington in 1843 at the precise time that Webster had ignored the Oregon question in the treaty with Great Britain, as previously related. Webster along with many others was convinced that Oregon was of little use to any one and felt that its remoteness made it impracticable for us to press our claims upon the section, certainly if any risk of friction with Great Britain was involved. Tyler entirely agreed with Webster, though it is commonly supposed that the principal reason for his willingness to let Oregon go was his hope that Great Britain would thereby be induced to acquiesce in his plans for the annexation of Texas. Whitman labored with Webster and Tyler and certainly accomplished much,—just how much

has been open to dispute. There seems, however, to be no reason to doubt that either Tyler or Webster, or those speaking for them, agreed that if Whitman would lead a caravan across the plains and up the Missouri to Oregon, thus demonstrating its accessibility, our claims to the country would be kept alive and pressed at the suitable time. Whitman kept his promise as did the administration.

Dr. Linn was in perfect accord with Benton but temperamentally his opposite, and was in better favor at the White House. It is impossible, however, not to believe that the change in the Oregon policy of the administration was largely due to the influence of Benton who was practically the only important man in Washington to defend that distant country against all assaults. On one occasion he said: "This ample, rich and elevated mountain region is deemed, by those unacquainted with the farthest West, to be, and to be forever, the desolate and frozen dominion of the wild beast and the savage. On the contrary, I view it as the future seat of population and power, where man is to appear in all the moral, intellectual, and physical endowments which ennoble the mountain race, and where liberty, independence and love of virtue are to make their last stand on earth."

This was drawing the long bow with a vengeance and indeed statements similar to these rather injured than helped his cause. There were some practical men in that day who were willing to learn but they were little affected by perfervid oratory in which there was a good deal of obvious overstatement.

It thus came about that he made enemies by saying too much of a country so far away and taking too little interest in Texas which was near at hand. Benton's views on the last-named question were almost exactly those of Henry Clay at the opening of his canvass in 1844, but he lacked the facility of Clay in explaining his position.

Clay, as a candidate for the presidency, wrote the famous Raleigh Letter (so called from the place of writing it) in which he announced that he was favorable to the annexation of Texas only in case Mexico, Texas and the United States were agreed upon the proposition, to the end that it be accomplished without injustice to any one and in consonance with national honor. It made an immense sensation and if Clay had never modified the statements therein contained he would probably have been elected President. Because Benton agreed to the sentiments expressed in this letter, he was by some esteemed a Clay man, though he

gave his adherence to Cass. Benton was not accustomed to writing letters on matters of national policy except to his constituents, preferring to discuss great measures in the Senate ; and though it is not likely he would ever under any circumstances have written such a document as the Raleigh Letter, because he did not like to discuss matters relating to slavery when they could be avoided, it is certain that if he had taken such a stand nothing could have moved him from it. Unfortunately, Clay, finding the Raleigh Letter unpopular in the South, took advantage of a slight change in the situation and wrote to a Southern friend two letters, known as the Alabama Letters, in which he seemed to hedge very decidedly on the position taken in the Raleigh Letter. In consequence he was accused by the Abolitionists of blowing hot and cold, of desiring to be an anti-slavery man in the North and a pro-slavery man in the South. This was not just to Clay but the result was his defeat. Benton hated the Abolitionists as much as Clay did, but he was so constituted that he never could have taken a strong position on any subject and modified it later. For this reason the relations thereafter between him and Clay were anything but pleasant.

Enough has been related in this narrative of the



uncompromising nature of the man so that it is scarcely necessary to comment at length upon it. Among all the great enmities of his life—and there were many—that against Jackson seems to have been the only one that was ever fully repented of and forgotten. There were occasions when he was with difficulty kept out of duels with Clay and others, in spite of his resolutions on the subject; and though at times he would be on speaking terms with his opponents and observe an ordinary degree of courtesy toward them, he nursed his wrath, which broke out on the next occasion with greater virulence than before. If “earth has no rage like love to hatred turned,” the exact reverse seems to have been true in regard to his relations with Jackson. The bitterness which he for years felt toward him is in strange contrast with his later admiration and is the one feature of his whole career which seems contradictory. One can only believe that if his imperious nature could have been touched in the right spot on other occasions and in other relations, the result would have been beneficial to all concerned.

Certainly it was quite as much his mannerisms as the principles he espoused, that started the opposition to him at the last. There seems little

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doubt that if he had been more tactful, he could have overcome his political enemies in Missouri and secured the sixth election to the Senate. Tact was not one of his qualities and he had been spoiled for any semblance of diplomacy in politics by the singular successes of his early career. There were many times when the positions he took, as on the Oregon question or Texas annexation, were exceedingly unpopular at home and he was severely criticised by the press and denounced in public meetings even by those who had been his former partisans. On many occasions he had seen his position justified by time and he counted rather too much on this. He seems never to have reflected that his continued residence in Washington had made him a stranger to the rising generation in Missouri, and he overestimated the effect which his many services and acknowledged abilities had upon the people. When he declared that "the slavery question was like the plague of frogs which appeared everywhere from the scullery to the nuptial couch," he at least understood how important and wide-spread the issue had become. He insisted either on ignoring or smothering it when such things were impossible. At the time when Atchison, Claiborne F. Jackson and other radical pro-

slavery leaders, were active in every part of Missouri, stirring up opposition, not so much because of personal antipathy to Benton, but because he stood in the way of their cherished plans, he took the matter altogether too calmly. He would refuse requests to speak and at times seemed rather cavalier in replies to his constituents. He evidently looked upon himself as their shepherd and considered it their duty to follow him without question.

This was a temperamental fault which in so strong a nature as his could not be overcome. It seems probable that if he had waited a few years in Missouri before going to Washington he would have been more closely identified with the people and the state, and might have kept a closer hold on their affections at the last. He did have some difficulty at first in making the people see that he was the sort of senator they wished; for as has been noted his election was accomplished with difficulty in the face of bitter opposition and under circumstances which long rankled in the breasts of his opponents. If he could have come into close personal contact with his constituents in 1845-50, he might have achieved success without sacrificing principle. That was not to be, and argues a Benton that did not exist.

It is difficult to speak of Benton's vanity in any detail without doing the man an injustice. Egotism clothed him as with a garment. At times it was so noticeable as to detract greatly from his usefulness. It undoubtedly acted as a bar to whatever ambitions he had for the presidency. And, indeed, it is a little difficult to understand on what grounds his vanity was based. Physically he was a remarkable man, six feet tall, well-built and with an enormous head and striking face such as no one ever saw without remarking upon. But though Benton was rather vain of his looks and always dressed with scrupulous care his appearance was not the chief cause of his egotism. His vanity was centred largely upon his knowledge of men and events in American history. His memory seems to have been very retentive as to facts. To him dates were an open book and such was the cast of this faculty that he could remember the very page of a volume on which was recorded what he wished to look up. He was a great student of maps and frequently confounded those who tried to impose bogus drawings on the Senate. In this respect he seems to have had no superior in his time, not even that great scholar, John Quincy Adams. But his erudition must be looked upon in a comparative light and

viewed according to the standards of his age rather than our own. Although his learning tended to pedantry he was for his age and times much more of a scholar than his mannerisms indicated.

It is not possible to compare the intellectual power of Benton and Webster: there is almost exclusively a contrast. Yet, because Benton could remember dates and facts, could answer almost instantly any question propounded to him on any public question, there is no doubt that he looked upon himself as much superior to Webster.

The last fifteen years of his life were lived almost constantly at Washington where he had a fine home filled with many valuable books and manuscripts. Books were less numerous then than now but they were more carefully read. Benton was more omnivorous than discriminating in his reading which seems to have been largely that of history and biography and very little of *belles lettres*. Considering how much he read, it is astonishing that he was not able to absorb something of the style of the great masters; but he never did, even in the remotest degree. He loved to air his learning in the Senate, using Latin and Greek phrases more as a freshman than as a scholar, though it is certain

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that he did have a tolerable acquaintance with the classics.

Wherein he failed was as a speculative philosopher. He ignored or despised the arts of the schoolmen. Although he never used any of the classic models in his speeches, there is some reason to believe that he looked upon himself as the American Burke. He much overestimated the effect which his utterances had on the public. He believed that the attention of the American people was centred on "Benton," as he was wont to speak of himself in a high, impersonal fashion, much more so than the situation warranted.

His attacks on Calhoun were at times modeled, as he thought, on the orations of Cicero against Cataline, yet there was not the slightest resemblance between them except in the intense patriotism which characterized both. Indeed, Benton lived so much apart from men in his intellectual activities that he became largely divorced from the society which surrounded him, and in time he began to look upon his isolation as due to his own preponderating importance. There is no doubt of this and many instances might be multiplied to show how he felt, as for instance, his belief that every American would buy his "Thirty Years' View."

But it would be wrong to bring forward this feature of his character too prominently. He had so many virtues that his petty vanities and his egotism were not objectionable to his peers, once they came to understand the man. It is evident that he was little given to introspection in which he differed greatly from Adams. He was impulsive and dogmatic, and seemed anxious only to get facts from his associates, caring little for their views. In his later years he was greatly irritated over opposition to himself in Missouri. He would not permit the slightest interruption in his public speeches to constituents and when any was attempted would proceed in his lordly manner to pour vitriol upon the devoted head of his opponent. It cannot be said that on these occasions he displayed discretion or that he was always right. He used abuse instead of argument and at times indulged in language which was neither refined nor justifiable. This habit grew as he saw that the people of Missouri were turning from him at a time when he looked upon himself as the most important man in the country and one whom his state could not do without. These faults brought about his own undoing.

His hatred of dictation was such that he never would attend a caucus of any kind. He considered

that it was undemocratic and subversive of justice, and that it relegated the power really to a minority as was often the case when a bare majority of the majority were able to control legislation. He also had a distrust of national conventions, which did not appeal to his sense of fitness. He liked the older method of nominations by resolutions of mass meetings, or of legislatures, or possibly of state or county conventions. The two-thirds rule was particularly obnoxious to him especially after 1844 when it killed Van Buren whom he was anxious to see nominated.

Another annoyance was the established custom of allowing members to pair on any question. This was putting a premium on absence from Congress and to him seemed little less than a crime. In his early days the compensation of a member was eight dollars a day—about twelve hundred dollars a year. Many members could not give up their time entirely for such a sum and found it convenient to pair and go home. Benton made it his proud boast that he was in the Senate every day from the opening to the close of the session unless detained by illness, and he was insistent that others should be as faithful as he.

All great men have their strong individualities.



It would be hard to pick out a man in all our history who has in any respect resembled Benton. He stood alone among all his peers and cared very little for the approbation of other men—certainly not enough to change the current of his thoughts or take any action that would be contrary to what he deemed the plain duty before him. It would be idle to say that he was without faults or limitations, but it is nothing less than the truth to assert that he was one of the most remarkable of American statesmen. His record of public service has perhaps been as important for good as that of any of the great characters in our history. Had it been his good fortune early in life to have come under the refining influences of the best culture of America it would have greatly improved him, though it might by the same token have made it impossible for him to achieve the career which he has left to posterity. Benton was undoubtedly one of the most forceful men of his age but owing to many circumstances he has left smaller impress upon the public mind than many of his associates, who were not only less virile but who accomplished less for the country. As was remarked in the opening chapter of this volume, he died just before the outbreak of the Civil War and there was such a plethora of dis-

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tinguished men arising out of that conflict that Benton's name has suffered undeserved eclipse which is now being removed under the searching light of historical investigation.

## CHAPTER XV

### ORATOR AND AUTHOR

THAT Benton's memory survives at all is due largely to the monumental work, "Thirty Years' View of the United States Senate," which he completed shortly before his death. There is scarcely a single book of its kind that is so valuable to the historian or student, but it is very little read by any one else. When Benton lost his seat in the Senate he began this work and completed it with incredible rapidity. He collected private papers from Jackson and others. He had always been careful to preserve his own, so that the first volume contains a most authoritative commentary on many of the important events in our history. This he wrote with his own hand but it is a most curious composition. He did not appear openly on the title page as its author and a portion of it is written in the third person. At other times he freely uses the first personal pronoun. Again he speaks of himself as "the author of this View" or as "Mr. Benton." While for the most part the record is chronological, there are very important

lapses in it and many things are introduced in an unusual manner.

He was at work on his second volume when his house and all its valuable contents were burned. He started to work again philosophically but he frequently laments the loss of the papers, and the second volume, which ought to be the more important of the two, is therefore less so than it should be. His remarkable memory made it possible for him to utter statements on his own authority and these must be accepted as facts, though the original documents would have been priceless. The volumes were issued some years apart and were widely read at the time, though he expected for them a much greater circulation than they obtained. Now it is possible to purchase them for a small sum at second-hand book stores.

Benton's intention was to make this work an argument as well as a history. Didactically it was devoted to showing that there was no fear the North would interfere with slavery; that it never had done so; that Calhoun was wrong in saying that it had or would do so; and that the South Carolinian himself in his earlier and better years had entertained liberal views on the subject. Perhaps Benton's hope was that he could prove nullifi-

cation so absurd historically, and personally as regarded its followers, that it would be possible to stem the rising tide of rebellion. He devoted much space to showing that Calhoun had acquiesced in the refusal to take Texas in 1818 and succeeded, though the papers he sought had been abstracted from the files of the State Department. Still he told his story so circumstantially and with such an array of corroborative evidence, that there is no longer a doubt of its truth. He made the mistake of supposing that the Southern people after the Compromises of 1850 desired any such proof. They were bent upon a cotton empire of their own and were not to be convinced against their will.

The unfortunate part of the work is that it ends very abruptly and just at the time when he might have given us much that would now be interesting and helpful. He refused to continue it with much detail after the Compromises of 1850, evidently hoping that an agreement could be reached and having no desire needlessly to wound the feelings of any person. He omitted a good many things that he might have told us. In the book there is very little that is personally offensive regarding any man. It is appeal and not invective. Later on he prepared for a new edition a slight biograph-

ical sketch of himself which throws little light on his career, and is mostly devoted to his public policy with which every one was already familiar.

As a rule Benton wrote very badly. He never mastered the simplest rules of composition. Sometimes his sentences contain two hundred words, and are so full of dependent clauses that the meaning is vague. He delighted in veiled allusions, and in reading the book there are times when it is difficult to understand whether he is speaking for himself or not. He wrote many short appreciations of the great men he had known and was fond of obituary comments. His fine vein of sentiment was often spoiled by a bungling manner of expression.

Benton's other great work was an abridgment of the Debates in Congress from the beginning down to 1850. This was a colossal undertaking, calling for untiring industry and no little judgment. It comprises many volumes and is still a standard work, though it loses much from the fact that in early times speeches were not reported *verbatim* but in the present Hansard style of the British Parliament, in which the sense and the language for the most part are preserved, without verbal accuracy. This immense task was completed in about a year and without assistance,

Indeed he never employed a clerk until in his last days. His penmanship was very florid, given to flourishes but perfectly legible.

His only other book was an argument against the Dred Scott decision. This was a political tract and his last literary effort, some of it being dictated when he was too weak to speak above a whisper. It was a strong paper for the times. It completely demolished the Taney theory that slavery was a national institution, penetrating by virtue of the Constitution wherever that instrument had effect. What angered Benton most was the declaration that the Missouri Compromise was unconstitutional on the ground that Congress had no right to legislate against slavery in the territories. It is true that at this time the Missouri Compromise had been repealed by Congress and the decision was of no practical effect so far as that legislation was concerned; but as slavery still existed and the status of some of the territories was not yet fixed, Benton was alarmed. He saw that the result of this opinion,—for it was that rather than a decision, as the Dred Scott case had been dismissed on a technicality and there was no occasion for the *obiter dicta* which followed—would be to make the South much more bitter and that

the North would resist its expression of resentment by every possible means. He had lived to see the Border War burst out in its fury just beyond the confines of Missouri ; to see Senator Atchison, his colleague, become the leader of the radical pro-slavery party ; and he wrote for posterity his protest against the heresies of the school of nullifiers who had now become almost open secessionists.

This work created much attention at the time it was issued, but pretty soon the war came on and with it the whole slavery question was eliminated. To-day it is still one of the ablest treatises on the whole subject, though interest in it is academic rather than practical.

During his career Benton published, in pamphlet form, many of his speeches which he circulated extensively. Aside from the works already mentioned, his literary efforts were confined to his early editorship of the *Missouri Enquirer*, which was more vigorous than polite, more strenuous than elegant in style. He frequently contributed to the *Globe*, but did not sign his articles. He wrote many letters to his constituents and others and was especially strong in stating his views when invited by political bodies to address them, although their invitations were almost invariably declined. His



greatest speech outside of the Senate and Missouri was in Faneuil Hall, in Boston, not long before his death.

We have seen that Benton was vain of his oratory and without much reason. He spoke incessantly and his set speeches were prepared with great care. Here again we see the faults of his style. He lacked the power of concentration and generally was not lucid. In matters pertaining to finance he was at his best, for here he dealt with cold facts; but when he let his imagination have free rein, he was likely to wander. He never tired of calling up the history of Greece and Rome for examples and precedents or warnings. Though this was a custom of his age, he certainly exceeded any normal limit, and it is doubtful if those who read his speeches were greatly edified by his display of historical knowledge. When worked up to a high pitch of feeling, Benton was seldom choice in the use of language, but in the revision of his speeches he eliminated many of the things which would have been more interesting than some that were allowed to stand.

His voice was strong but his throat weak, often bleeding freely after a long speech. When he had an important address to make, he would sometimes

keep almost absolute silence for three or four days. In the *mêlée* of forensic debate, he would often become so husky that he could scarcely be heard. His throat affection was a result of his early tendency to tuberculosis. If in early youth he could have come under the care of a good teacher of elocution, he would have been greatly benefited. He was likely to confound noise with impressiveness. Clay's voice was one of the most perfect in history. So clear was it that it was said people in the gallery could hear perfectly when he spoke to a neighbor in a whisper, at the same time that Benton was making the chamber resound with his voice.

It is essential to a proper understanding of Benton that a few brief extracts be given from his speeches and writings since they well exhibit his cast of mind. As preserved, the speeches are almost destitute of that wit for which he was famed. The reason for this is that he considered such exhibitions as purely temporary in effect and liable to misconstruction when read.

In 1824 he made the first of many speeches in favor of a change of the method of electing president and vice-president, a subject that was dear to his heart, though he could seldom keep an audience. He had a plan which was scarcely better than the

one now employed. It was to have a direct election in each Congressional district, the vote in such district counting as one electoral vote for the man who received the largest number of popular votes. This entirely eliminated the votes based on senatorships and was opposed by the smaller states which were naturally averse to suffering any loss of power.

In the course of a very long argument in which he went over a great deal of history this occurs :

“Of the twenty-five centuries that the Roman state has existed, to what period do we look for the generals and statesmen, the poets and orators, the philosophers and historians, the sculptors, painters, and architects, whose immortal works have fixed upon their country the admiring eyes of all succeeding ages? Is it to the reigns of the seven first kings?—to the reigns of the emperors, proclaimed by the prætorian bands?—to the reigns of the Sovereign Pontiffs, chosen by a select body of electors in a conclave of most holy cardinals? No—we look to none of these, but to that short interval of four centuries and a half which lies between the expulsion of the Tarquins, and the re-establishment of monarchy in the person of Octavius Cæsar. It is to this short period, during which the consuls, tribunes, and prætors, were annually elected by a

direct vote of the people, to which we look ourselves, and to which we direct the infant minds of our children, for all the works and monuments of Roman greatness; for roads, bridges, and aqueducts constructed; for victories gained, nations vanquished, commerce extended, treasure imported, libraries founded, learning encouraged, the arts flourishing, the city embellished, and the kings of the earth humbly suing to be admitted into the friendship, and taken under the protection, of the Roman people. It was of this magnificent period that Cicero spoke, when he proclaimed the people of Rome to be the masters of kings, and the conquerors and commanders of all the nations of the earth. And, what is wonderful, during this whole period, in a succession of four hundred and fifty annual elections, the people never once preferred a citizen to the consulship who did not carry the prosperity and the glory of the Republic to a point beyond that at which he had found it."

This is not very consequential. It is not very well done and not altogether true. There are columns of such talk which seem to have very slight connection with the subject in hand. Clay would have illuminated it by talking very briefly of history and paying a good deal of attention to existing

conditions, while Webster in a few Miltonian sentences would have expressed much more than there is in pages of Benton's effort.

When called upon to speak without preparation Benton often made a better showing. Then he had no time to look up precedents or concoct long sentences. We have already seen how vigorously he opposed the Panama mission in which Clay was so much interested, and in a speech of some warmth he had this to say on a burning topic :

“ Our policy toward Hayti, the old San Domingo, has been fixed for three and thirty years. We trade with her, but no diplomatic relations have been established between us. We purchase coffee from her, and pay her for it ; but we interchange no consuls or ministers. We receive no mulatto consuls, or black ambassadors from her. And why ? Because the peace of eleven States in this Union will not permit the fruits of a successful negro insurrection to be exhibited among them. It will not permit black consuls and ambassadors to establish themselves in our cities, and to parade through our country, and give to their fellow blacks in the United States, proof in hand of the honors which await them, for a like successful effort on their part. It will not permit the fact to

be seen, and told, that for the murder of their masters and mistresses, they are to find friends among the white people of these United States. No, this is a question which has been determined here for three and thirty years; one which has never been open for discussion, at home or abroad, neither under the presidency of General Washington, of the first Mr. Adams, of Mr. Jefferson, Mr. Madison, or Mr. Monroe. It is one which cannot be discussed in this chamber on this day; and shall we go to Panama to discuss it? I take it in the mildest supposed character of this Congress—shall we go there to advise and consult in council about it? Who are to advise and sit in judgment upon it? Five nations who have already put the black man upon an equality with the white, not only in their constitutions but in real life: five nations who have at this moment (at least some of them) black generals in their armies and mulatto senators in their congresses!”

This is better. It is direct, incisive and states openly what others had thought but had feared to express.

Another interesting example is given in his tribute to Jefferson who had just died: “He was no speaker, but a most instructive and fascinating

talker ; and the Declaration of Independence, even if it had not been sistered by innumerable classic productions, would have placed him at the head of political writers. I never saw him but once, when I went to visit him in his retirement ; and then I felt, for four hours, the charms of his bewitching talk. I was then a young senator, just coming on the stage of public life—he a patriarchal statesman just going off the stage of natural life, and evidently desirous to impress some views of policy upon me—a design in which he certainly did not fail. I honor him as a patriot of the Revolution—as one of the founders of the Republic—as the founder of the political school to which I belong ; and for the purity of character which he possessed in common with his compatriots, and which gives to the birth of the United States a beauty of parentage which the genealogy of no other nation can show.’’

The personal note in this is rather fine and the sentiment is not badly expressed. In writing of men, Benton always appeared to better advantage than when discussing principles.

He made innumerable speeches on the subject of cheap or free lands for the poor. No man understood the question better than he but he was not

always happy in his arguments. The following expresses his whole philosophy :

“Tenantry is unfavorable to freedom. It lays the foundation for separate orders in society, annihilates the love of country, and weakens the spirit of independence. The farming tenant has, in fact, no country, no hearth, no domestic altar, no household god. The freeholder, on the contrary, is the natural supporter of a free government ; and it should be the policy of republics to multiply their freeholders, as it is the policy of monarchies to multiply tenants. We are a republic, and we wish to continue so : then multiply the class of freeholders ; pass the public lands cheaply and easily into the hands of the people ; sell, for a reasonable price, to those who are able to pay ; and give, without price, to those who are not. I say give, without price, to those who are not able to pay ; and that which is so given, I consider as sold for the best of prices ; for a price above gold and silver ; a price which cannot be carried away by delinquent officers, nor lost in failing banks, nor stolen by thieves, nor squandered by an improvident and extravagant administration. It brings a price above rubies—a race of virtuous and independent laborers, the true supporters of their country, and



the stock from which its best defenders must be drawn.”

The ideas here expressed are admirable. They are those which the country finally adopted to its infinite gain. But there is an awkwardness of expression which is notable and as this speech had the benefit of at least two revisions in type after it was delivered, it can be seen that the fault lay in Benton's fundamental lack of literary style. In fact, of all the many speeches that he made in Congress, there is hardly one that is ever quoted in these days,—indeed hardly a single expression is remembered. This is the more remarkable because he spoke so often and his constant hammering at a subject usually resulted in success. On the contrary, people to-day continue to read the speeches of Webster, Clay and Calhoun, and remember their words, though as a matter of fact these statesmen often lost their measures and failed in their contentions.

We have seen that Benton opened the debate on the Foot resolution in which Webster and Hayne had that greatest of forensic duels. Foot's resolution of inquiry into the desirability of stopping the survey of public lands and thus taking them out of the market was concurrent with one in the House which looked to a division of the proceeds of land

sales among the states. There are a few sentences in this opening speech by Benton that are worthy of remembrance. He was the only speaker who kept to his text in that debate, and the following extract shows the moral fibre of the man as well as his views on the subject :

“I will vote for no such inquiry. I would as soon vote for inquiries into the expediency of conflagrating cities, of devastating provinces, and of submerging fruitful lands under the waves of the ocean. I take my stand upon a great moral principle : that it is never right to inquire into the expediency of doing wrong.

“The proposed inquiry is to do wrong; to inflict unmixed, unmitigated evil upon the new States and Territories. Such inquiries are not to be tolerated. Courts of law will not sustain actions which have immoral foundations ; legislative bodies should not sustain inquiries which have iniquitous conclusions. Courts of law make it an object to give public satisfaction in the administration of justice ; legislative bodies should consult the public tranquillity in the prosecution of their measures. They should not alarm and agitate the country ; yet, this inquiry, if it goes on, will give the greatest dissatisfaction to the new States in the West and South. It will alarm

and agitate them, and ought to do it. It will connect itself with other inquiries going on elsewhere—in the other end of this building—in the House of Representatives—to make the new States a source of revenue to the old ones, to deliver them up to a new set of masters, to throw them as grapes into the wine press, to be trod and squeezed as long as one drop of juice could be pressed from their hulls. These measures will go together ; and if that resolution passes, and this one passes, the transition will be easy and natural, from dividing the money after the lands are sold, to divide the lands before they are sold, and then to renting the land and drawing an annual income, instead of selling it for a price in hand. The signs are portentous ; the crisis is alarming ; it is time for the new States to wake up to their danger, and to prepare for a struggle which carries ruin and disgrace to them, if the issue is against them.”

Outside of his speeches on financial measures this excerpt is perhaps equal to anything that Benton has preserved for us. It is true that in the course of the debate he was deceived as to the intentions of Hayne and Calhoun, but his position was sound and he consistently adhered to it through his whole career. But when the slavery question was intro-

duced, he returned to the subject in another speech, still supposing that Calhoun was as anxious as himself to allay any feeling on the subject and to preserve the Union. He took the course not unusual in those days, of attacking the Abolitionists and making them responsible for the agitation, though on this point also he was soon to be undeceived. He said:

“I can truly say, that slavery in the abstract, has but few advocates or defenders in the slaveholding States, and that slavery as it is, an hereditary institution descended upon us from our ancestors, would have fewer advocates among us than it has, if those who have nothing to do with the subject would only let us alone. The sentiment in favor of slavery was much weaker before those intermeddlers began their operations than it is at present. The views of leading men in the North and the South were indisputably the same in the earlier periods of our government. Of this our legislative history contains the highest proof. The foreign slave trade was prohibited in Virginia, as soon as the Revolution began. It was one of her first acts of sovereignty. In the convention of that State which adopted the federal constitution, it was an objection to that instrument that it tolerated the

African slave-trade for twenty years. Nothing that has appeared since has surpassed the indignant denunciations of this traffic by Patrick Henry, George Mason, and others, in that convention.

“Sir, I regard with admiration, that is to say, with wonder, the sublime morality of those who cannot bear the abstract contemplation of slavery, at the distance of five hundred or a thousand miles off. It is entirely above, that is to say, it affects a vast superiority over the morality of the primitive Christians, the apostles of Christ, and Christ Himself. Christ and the apostles appeared in a province of the Roman empire, when that empire was called the Roman world, and that world was filled with slaves.”

There is not much eloquence in this speech, but from it we learn what were his views as to the Abolitionists.

One more example of his manner of composition must suffice. It is the opening of the chapter on the downfall of the National Bank in his “Thirty Years’ View.” As he was perhaps more responsible than any man for having slain this “dragon,” he naturally was much elated and attempted to describe it in his very best vein. We have here perhaps the most characteristic example of his style,

when he is anxious to make a favorable impression, and of course he fails lamentably :

“When the author of the *Æneid* had shown the opening grandeur of Rome, he deemed himself justified in departing from the chronological order of events to look ahead, and give a glimpse of the dead Marcellus, hope and heir of the Augustan empire; in the like manner the writer of this View, after having shown the greatness of the United States Bank—exemplified in her capacity to have Jackson condemned—the government directors and a secretary of the treasury rejected—a committee of the House of Representatives repulsed—the country convulsed and agonized—and to obtain from the Senate of the United States a committee to proceed to the city of Philadelphia to ‘wash out its foul linen’;—after seeing all this and beholding the greatness of the moneyed power at the culminating point of its domination, I feel justified in looking ahead a few years to see it in its altered phase—in its ruined and fallen estate.”

It will be noted that this is a single sentence and about as awkward a one as an educated man could write.

It remains to be said that although Benton had many faults as a writer and a speaker, he was

much more successful than many of those who were greatly his superiors. The "Thirty Years' View" will be remembered and read by those who seek to learn the history of the times involved, when most other books of the period have been lost sight of. And in spite of the lack of style, or perhaps because of the peculiar style of the work, it has an individual flavor that is not at all displeasing. The book bears on it the stamp of the man, is so completely a revelation of his thoughts, as well as a narrative of his deeds, that we could not wish it different. It might be a finer literary composition but it would not be so vital, so personal—would not be Benton.

## CHAPTER XVI

### THE END

THERE is something beautiful in contemplating the last seven years of Benton's life. At an age when most men are willing to retire from activity, he fought the hardest political battles of his life and lost them all but one. Such reverses would have embittered a lesser man; but he was made of sterner stuff and to the last was hopeful. When his beloved home, containing all his records and literary treasures, was burned in February, 1855, he looked on with composure and was afterward taken by his daughter Jessie to her own house near by, where she records: "Neither of us had slept, but he made me lie down and we talked calmly together as only those who love one another can talk after a calamity." It is interesting to note that when Congress heard of the disaster, it immediately adjourned as a mark of its respect and sympathy for him.

His wife died in 1854, and for four years more Benton strove with the political stars in their courses. The last two years of his life showed a



constant decline in physical powers, but he labored to the end to complete his literary work.

Two years before his death he suspected that his trouble was cancer. Without communicating his fears to any one, he carefully read up the disease and for a long time noted the symptoms, which he reported to the physicians. They found his diagnosis to be correct. He was so cheerful that they hoped for a while that he might live, but even Benton's indomitable spirit at length began to fail. He had said as a young man when attacked by consumption: "If it had been a battle, I would have had some chance, or even in a desperate duel. But for this there is no chance. All was fixed and is inevitable." He probably had the same view of death in his old age. He disliked the thought of dying in his bed, for the fighting spirit remained strong to the last. Always a man of deep religious feeling and constant in his Christian duties, he now devoted much attention to putting his spiritual house in order. The end came at his Washington home, April 10, 1858. He had especially requested that Congress take no note of the event; it did, however, adjourn and many notable men paid tribute to his personal and civic virtues.

It is pleasing to note that a reaction came and

the people of Missouri who had thrice in recent years rejected him, now did their best to atone for their insult and neglect. The funeral in St. Louis was the most notable event of its sort that has ever taken place beyond the Mississippi and was rivaled in the West only by the demonstrations over Clay a few years before at Lexington, and later by the funeral obsequies of Lincoln. Business was entirely suspended in St. Louis and the *cortège* was reported to be two miles long, as every sort of civic and military association participated. The body was laid at rest in Bellefontaine Cemetery where his sons had already been buried with other members of the Benton family. The contemporaneous accounts of the funeral indicate that this unanimous expression of grief and sympathy was genuine in spite of the fact that both city and state had so lately rejected his services. Benton's rugged honesty appealed to all and the funeral orations and addresses, of which there were many then and soon afterward, indicate how deep was the hold which Benton had upon the people whom he had served so long. Some of the finest tributes came from those who had fought him hardest in the political field and who were finally responsible for his fall.

A handsome monument was erected in one of the St. Louis parks. The heroic statue surmounting it faces the West and the index finger points to the setting sun. Beneath is the inscription taken from one of his speeches: "There is the East: there is the road to India."

Even in death and defeat Benton was a victor. There can be no doubt that his was the potent voice that held Missouri in the Union against all the desperate efforts to drive her into secession. There were those who remembered the old man eloquent, those who had heard him in that famous campaign of 1856 when he went up and down the state pleading for the Union. If Missouri had joined the Confederacy, the contest would have been longer and more difficult, though no student of history can believe that eventually there would have been a different result. Of those who in and out of season raised their voices against all threats or suggestions of disunion; of those who loved to smite secession wherever it lifted its head, no man was more ardent, more continuous in his labors, more uncompromising and more effectual than Benton.

When the time came, he was found where he predicted he would be,—on the side of his country and the Union. Though his majestic soul had

taken flight to its Maker, his principles survived to conquer.

The effort has been made in these pages to draw a portrait of a largely-forgotten man and to set him properly in his historical niche. It is likely some will think too much is claimed for one whose name has left such slight impress on the popular mind. But there has been no purpose in this sketch to magnify his virtues, or to exaggerate the services which he so nobly performed. In saying that he was the most comprehensive statesman of his time it is not denied that there were others who in mere intellectual ability were his superiors; certainly there were those who exerted more direct influence on men in and out of politics, those whose voices were more forceful on many public questions. But Benton is to be judged not solely by what he did but also by what he aimed to do. We owe to him Oregon, California, the cheap land system that has enriched the country so rapidly, the specie standard, the transcontinental railway lines, and a debt that can never be repaid in keeping alive the fires of patriotism at a time when it required tremendous self-sacrifice to renounce his party. Benton was the first martyr to the slavery cause since he was as surely struck down by the slave power as

Charles Sumner and he deserves much more sympathy than the latter, who had in a sense provoked the attack.

That Benton was often too dogmatic, that there were occasions when he mistook stubbornness for principle, that he might at times have been more genial and less arrogant, we do not deny. These are the faults which show the strong human side of the man, though his frailties were not those of his age or those of most of his colleagues. They do not render the portrait less attractive. On the contrary, we can but admire the man who in turn was called an Apollo, a "wild buffalo," and a "gnarled oak," and whose career was one of singular success and unparalleled usefulness.

It is only fitting that a man so eminent in his time, whose principles for the most part are as sound to-day as then and the advantages of whose legislation we are now enjoying, should be remembered gratefully. This is neither the time nor the place for comparisons, but it is probable that there stands to-day on the statute books of the country more wise and sound legislation that can fairly be ascribed to Benton than to any other man who ever sat in Congress; while his name is not connected with a single act of personal dishonor, or a single

unworthy piece of legislation. This is a record fit to be the epitaph of one of the greatest men of the age.

Or, if an epitaph be needed, could a better one be found than the prophetic words in which he stated his position to Calhoun? —

“I shall be found in the right place—on the side of my country and the Union.”

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Considering how large a place Benton occupied on the national stage for thirty years, it is surprising that there are so few books dealing directly with his career. The principal source of information is his own large work in two volumes entitled, "Thirty Years' View of the United States Senate," 1854, *et seq.*, and a new edition, with index, published in 1893. Besides this, there is but one volume devoted to Benton's life; viz., Theodore Roosevelt's "Thomas H. Benton," American Statesmen Series, 1886. In the same Series are several volumes which contain much that bears on Benton or the political interests with which he was connected; viz., Schurz's "Clay" (1887); Von Holst's "Calhoun" (1882); Stevens' "Gallatin" (1883) and Lothrop's "Seward" (1896). In most volumes of history dealing with the period from 1820 to 1850, as well as in reminiscences of statesmen living at that time, there will be found references to Benton, but not nearly so many as one would suppose. This is partially accounted for by his independent spirit which led him to keep aloof from combinations, and by the fact that socially he was almost a recluse. Of the works consulted in preparing this volume, the following are a few of the more important:—

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The above list is far from exhaustive. In addition, Niles' Register and the Debates of Congress have been freely consulted. There has been much recourse to political pamphlets and broadsides and to a very large range of literature in which Benton is occasionally mentioned, though not with much detail. Mrs. Jessie Benton Frémont wrote a brief sketch of her father as an introduction to the autobiography of her husband. The author also desires to acknowledge the aid of Colonel A. K. McClure in giving not only many personal incidents but an historic setting of Benton, whom he well knew in the latter's last years.

NOTE.—Just as this book was passing through the press, a biography of Benton by William M. Meigs appeared, and acknowledgment is made for the use of a few personal incidents concerning him, not elsewhere published.



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