

CHAPTER XIII

FINAL COLLAPSE

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THE cracks which in 1842 and 1843 had become apparent in the newly repaired structure of the commercial state, were multiplied and widened in the years which immediately succeeded. The era of reconstruction was as brief in its duration as it was deceptive in its promise; and the forces of disruption, as if renewed by their interval of inactivity, began now to effect the final downfall of the old commercial system of the St. Lawrence. The rivalry of the United States, the defection of Great Britain and the antagonism within Canada itself had been, since 1821, the three great factors which had threatened the achievement of the second commercial empire. In the half dozen years which elapsed between the passage of the Canada Corn Act and the publication of the annexation manifesto in Montreal, these antagonistic forces, united in irresistible combination, finally achieved their objective. The frustration of the old St. Lawrence system was finished and complete. It had not merely been defeated in a single battle; it had lost the second campaign and with it the entire war. And the material success of its enemies was accompanied by the loss of its own traditional support, the discredit of its ancient strategy, and the bankruptcy of its morale.

The St. Lawrence was a British imperial trade route in North America; and in these years its imperial connections were dissolving at the very moment when it was losing its American sources of supply. The renewal of American aggression was coincident with the decline of the second British Empire. On the one hand, the old colonial system was breaking up between the British declaration of economic independence and the Canadian demand for political autonomy; on the other, the expulsion of Canada from the trade of the United States was followed by the American commercial invasion of Canada. The Erie canal, which had diverted the trade of the American north-west away from the St. Lawrence, had been the work of New York state; but the drawback acts of 1845-