Charles Sumner, On the Crime Against Kansas, May 19–20, 1856

ABOUT THE READING As violence in Kansas between pro- and anti-slavery forces increased, Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts delivered a blunt antislavery speech in the United States Senate. He singled out for attack a strongly proslavery senator, A. P. Butler of South Carolina. Two days after the speech, Butler's nephew beat Sumner senseless on the floor of the Senate.

VOCABULARY

eminence importance

chivalrous gracious, gallant

fantastic not real

As you read *think about how Sumner's speech might have been received in the South.*

I must say something of a general character, particularly in response to what has fallen from Senators who have raised themselves to **eminence** on this floor in championship of human wrongs. I mean the Senator from South Carolina [A. P. Butler], and the Senator from Illinois [Stephen Douglas], who, though unlike as Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, yet, like this couple, sally forth together in the same adventure. . . The Senator from South Carolina has read many books of chivalry, and believes himself a **chivalrous** knight, with . . . honor and courage. Of course he has chosen a mistress to whom he has made his vows, and who, though ugly to others, is always lovely to him; . . . I mean . . . Slavery . . . The asserted rights of Slavery, which shock equality of all kinds, are cloaked by a **fantastic** claim of equality. If the slave States cannot enjoy what, in mockery of the great fathers of the Republic, he misnames

Sumner refers to the novel *Don Quixote.* The book tells the adventures of Don Quixote, a self-righteous knight whose vivid imagination blinds him to reality, and his servant, Sancho Panza.

Source: The Works of Charles Sumner, *vol. 4* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1870–1873).

Copyright © by Holt, Rinehart and Winston. All rights reserved.

equality under the Constitution in other words, the full power in the National Territories to compel fellowmen to unpaid toil, to separate husband and wife, and to sell little children at the auction block then, sir, the chivalric Senator will conduct the State of South Carolina out of the Union! Heroic knight ! Exalted Senator! A second Moses come for a second exodus! . . .

Sumner ridicules Bulter's threat that South Carolina would secede if the balance of free and slave states tipped in favor of the free states.

With regret, I come again upon the Senator from South Carolina, who . . . shows an incapacity of accuracy, whether in stating the Constitution, or in stating the law, whether in the details of statistics or the diversions of scholarship. He cannot open his mouth, but out there flies a blunder. . .

The contest, which, beginning in Kansas, has reached us, will soon be transferred from Congress to a broader stage, where every citizen will be not only spectator, but actor; and to their judgment I confidently appeal. . .

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. How does Sumner try to make Butler and his position on slavery seem ridiculous?

_____

_____

2. What do you think Sumner meant by "every citizen will be not only spectator, but actor"?

_____

_____

3. How do you think Sumner's speech was received in the South?

_____

_____

Copyright © by Holt, Rinehart and Winston. All rights reserved.