



HENRY CLAY.

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HENRY CLAY has been styled the Canning of America, as Daniel Webster has been likened to Burke. Clay and Webster were for forty years the leading orators of their country, and although, at their outset in life, they were for a time opposed to each other, during the latter and best part of their career they stood together on the same side, contending for the lead of the whig or conservative party of the United States. Both were the sons of men who moved in a humble station of life; Webster's father was a small New England farmer, and Clay's was a poor clergyman of Virginia. He was born of English parents at a place called the Slashes, in the county of Hanover, Eastern Virginia, on the 12th of April, 1777, just after the Declaration of Independence, and while the country was still amidst the throes of the revolution. He was the seventh child of a numerous family, some branches of which still remain in England, and which includes among its members Sir William Clay, a successful merchant and well-known member of the English House of Commons. His ancestors were among the earliest settlers in the States. Before he was four years old, his father died, leaving his mother with a large family of young children dependent upon her. Shortly afterwards she married again, having for her second husband Captain Henry Watkins, a man well worthy of her affections. His step-father and mother introduced him to the practical business of life at an early period; for even in his fourteenth year we find him an assistant at the store of Mr. Richard Denny, Richmond; his education, which was that of an ordinary private school, having been prematurely brought to a close rather than properly completed. But whatever deficiency there may have been in his early training was, as far as possible, supplied by the more effective discipline of *self-education*.

It soon became evident that he was capable of much higher pursuits, and accordingly his step-father took him away from the store, and placed him in the office of his friend, Peter Tinley, Esq., who was at that time clerk to the court of chancery. Here, by his diligent attention to his duties, he soon attracted attention, and made friends. It happened opportunely that Chancellor Wythe was just then in want of a private secretary, and young Clay entered into an engagement with him, which lasted four years, and proved the great turning-point in the future statesman's history. His employer, perceiving the singular ability and industry with which he performed his duties, soon became strongly attached to him, joined Governor Brooke in advising him to study for the bar, generously granted him the free use of his library, and himself undertook the task of superintending his studies. Accordingly, in 1796, he left Mr. Tinley's office and became a student at law. After a year's intense application, he qualified himself for admission, and obtained his diploma before he had fairly entered into manhood. But it was a matter of vital moment to him that he should commence practice forthwith, as his mother and sister were entirely dependent on his exertions for a living, and they accompanied him on his removal to Lexington, in Kentucky, when he began the practice of his profession. The same diligence characterised him throughout. His amenity, accessibility, close attention to business, and eloquence as an advocate, soon attracted suitors enough, and before many years were over, Henry Clay led the bar of his state. Alluding, years afterwards, to this period of his life, he said he was then "without patrons, without friends, and destitute of means;" and again, "I remember how comfortable I thought I should be, if I could make £100 Virginia money per annum, and with what delight I received the first fifteen shillings fee. My hopes were more than realised. I immediately rushed into a lucrative practice." As a not unnatural consequence of his success, he married; and it is gratifying to be able to add, that the union was a source of happiness to both parties. His wife was Lucretia, the daughter of Colonel Thomas Hart, of Lexington, whom he left a widow, and by whom he had eleven children, only two surviving him.

Henry Clay, as a youth and a man, was throughout life a diligent self-cultivator. He was an extensive reader, and he did not fail carefully to cultivate the art of speech, by which, indeed, he made his bread. On one occasion, when giving advice to young men, he described the secret of his success in life after the following manner: "I owe my success in life," said he, "chiefly to one single fact, viz.—that at the age of twenty-seven I commenced, and continued for years, the process of daily reading and speaking upon the contents of some historical or scientific book. These off-hand efforts were made, sometimes in a corn-field, at others in the forest, and not unfrequently in some distant barn, with the horse and the ox for my auditors. It is to this early practice of the art of all arts that I am indebted for the primary and leading impulses that stimulated me forward, and have shaped and moulded my whole subsequent destiny."

From the bar the road to the legislature is comparatively easy among us, as it is in England. He was first returned to the legislature of his state in 1803, and immediately assumed a prominent position there. Three years after, he was returned to Congress as a member of the Senate, and chosen speaker the following year. Webster and Calhoun did not enter it until some years later. Coming from a new state of the west, Mr. Clay at first took the side of Mr. Madison and the democratic party, and was soon recognised as one of its leading members. He was once more returned to the Senate, in 1811, when there was some prospect of a war with Great Britain; but withdrew from it to the lower house, where he had a more commanding position, and a better field for the display of his oratorical powers. He took his seat at the opening of Congress, November 4, 1811, and was elected to the honourable post of speaker by a majority of 31 in a house of 128 members. This high distinction, which was the more marked from the circumstance that there were many much more experienced members of his party in the house, was continued—with a short interval during his absence in negotiating the treaty of Ghent in 1814—till the year 1825, when he received the appointment of Secretary of State. He was chosen speaker on six different occasions, viz., in 1811, 1813, 1815, 1817, 1819, and 1823, and filled the chair about ten years altogether. He was Mr. Madison's most able supporter in Congress, in 1812, during the debates on the subject of foreign policy, especially as respected England, a war with which power Mr. Clay strongly urged. Indeed Mr. Madison attributed to Clay much of the success that attended his administration; and when congratulated on the successful conduct of the war, he said, "To the right arm of the administration, to Clay, all is due." Daniel Webster had by this time entered Congress, and was ranged with the moderate federalists on the side of peace. He represented the more pacific commercial character of New England, whereas Clay then represented the ardent and rather headstrong republicanism of the west. But though Webster was opposed to the war with England, he yet advocated such measures as were essential to the honour and safety of the country, and particularly an increase of the navy. "Even our party divisions cease," said he, "at the crater's edge. They are lost in attachment to the national character, where that national character is made respectable."

It is easy to understand the feelings which actuated Henry Clay, and the majority of our countrymen who sided with him at that time, in their eagerness for a war with Britain. While a child, war was raging about him, and our ancestors were engaged in a deadly struggle to free their country from British power. The impressions then made sank deep into their hearts, and the long war with England left behind it, together with our independence, many traditions of oppression and of hate. These still survived, when, in 1812, the attack was made upon the Chesapeake; and the numerous petty indignities committed, and supposed to have been committed, by Britain upon its late revolted colony came to a

head, and burst into open war. Clay was an enthusiastic nationalist; his love of country was his controlling principle; and it is therefore easy to understand the part he took on the occasion. It was this which made him a protectionist. He desired to quicken the industry of his country, to establish the peaceful arts there, and to render it independent of foreign supplies, from which it might at any time be cut off by the superior power of the British at sea. Hence the imposition of high protective duties, which at length became so intolerable that they threatened the existence of the Union. That policy has, however, been changed; and now that the old traditions are dying out, we trust we may look forward to a peaceful and mutually beneficial intercourse between America and England.

When the war was brought to a close, Mr. Clay was appointed one of the deputies to meet the British negotiators at Ghent to settle the terms of a treaty of peace, which has not since been broken. On his return to the States, he resumed his extensive practice at the bar, and in the House of Representatives he was appointed to the honourable post of speaker. Mr. Clay's personal and political influence steadily increased, and in 1824 he mainly contributed to carry the election of John Quincy Adams, of whom Mr. Clay was afterwards the first adviser in the cabinet. He held the office of Secretary of State under Mr. Adams, and in this capacity negotiated many important treaties with foreign governments. He succeeded in striking a blow at the system under which armed vessels were formerly enabled to carry on piracy under what were called "letters of marque." He advocated the cause of the South American revolted colonies, and induced the government of the United States to recognise their independence. He somewhat departed from the line of policy of the older statesmen of the Union, in taking part in the political affairs of Europe, having exerted himself to procure the intervention of Russia in establishing the independence of Greece.

When the high protectionist duties on British manufactures led to extreme agitation throughout the Union, and threatened the disruption of the northern and southern states, Mr. Clay projected and carried a compromise measure, which restored peace to the nation, and enabled it to adjust its financial policy after the excitement had subsided. But the anti-slavery movement soon threatened the States with new dangers, the end of which, indeed, no one can yet very clearly see. Being a zealous unionist, and not at all a zealous abolitionist, Mr. Clay again stepped forward with a new compromise bill, which he succeeded in carrying, in the belief (though, as events may yet prove, a vain one) that the vexed question of slavery in the States would thereby be permanently settled. Mr. Clay's readiness to make compromises on all important questions, has led some to call in question his statesmanship; but others, who recognise in all legislation a system of compromises, where extreme views are sacrificed for the sake of a wise moderation, have been found equally ready to defend him.

Henry Clay owed much of his influence to his personal qualities. He gave one the impression of a thorough-bred gentleman. His ways were most winning—we might almost say fascinating. His voice was beautiful; and his action while speaking was graceful, and yet emphatic. To a friend or stranger he was kindness itself; yet to an opponent he would display a lordly imperiousness. He spoke with earnestness, too; often with fiery eloquence, though he could be sweet and gentle as a woman in his more subdued moods. He could play upon the heart-strings as upon an instrument, and he could also rouse the fiery passions of our nature. To understand the enthusiastic admiration with which Henry Clay was regarded throughout the States, one must have seen him and heard him speak. Merely to read his speeches in the book in which they are collected, fails to give any adequate idea of the man. Webster's speeches are different: there you see the orator in all his greatness; and the orations of Webster will be read and admired long after those of Clay have been forgotten. And yet there are few of Webster's speeches which had the immediate effect of the more fervid orations of Clay.

The Earl of Carlisle, when on his last visit to this country, in 1841, met Mr. Clay more than once, and has given us an interesting account of his appearance at that time.

"I heard Mr. Clay in the Senate once," says he, "but every one told me that he was labouring under feebleness and exhaustion, so that I could only perceive the great charm in the tones of his voice. I think this most attractive quality was still more perceivable in private intercourse, as I certainly never met any public man, either in his country or in mine, always excepting Mr. Canning, who exercised such evident fascination over the minds and affections of his friends and followers, as Henry Clay. I thought his society most attractive, easy, simple, and genial, with great natural dignity." His lordship had afterwards an opportunity of visiting Mr. Clay at his country residence at Ashland, in Kentucky. "The qualities," says he, "which rivet the Senate and captivate his adherents, seemed to me both heightened and softened by his frank, courteous, simple intercourse. He lives with his family in a modest house, among fields of deep red soil, and the most luxuriant grass growing under very thriving and varied timber, the oak, sycamore, locust tree, cedar, and that beautiful ornament of the American woods, the sugar maple. He likes showing some English cattle. His countrymen seem to be in the habit of calling upon him without any introduction. Slavery, generally mild in the pastoral state of Kentucky, was certainly seen here in its least repulsive guise. Mr. Clay's own negro servant, Charles, was much devoted to him; he took him with him on a tour into Canada, and when some abolitionists there wanted him to leave his master—'Not if you were to give me both your provinces,' was the reply."

Mr. Clay was several times a candidate for the presidency, but failed to achieve that highest ambition of American statesmen. He died at Washington, in June, 1852, and on the 1st of July his remains were conveyed from Washington to New York. His funeral took place on the 4th, with all due solemnity, when a vast crowd, composed of senators, friends, and other admirers, assembled to pay the last tribute of regard to the memory of one who had throughout life shown such an undeviating attachment to his country, and rendered it such essential service in several critical periods of its history. His personal graces and high intellectual qualities will long be remembered; and after these have been forgotten, the traces of his useful public career will be read in the legislation of half a century.

We cannot close this biographical account better than by quoting from the following eloquent eulogium pronounced upon the departed statesman by Mr. Breckenridge, in the House of Representatives. "As a leader in a deliberative body, Mr. Clay had no equal in America; in him intellect, person, eloquence, and courage, united to form a character fit to command. He fired with his own enthusiasm, and controlled with his amazing will, individuals and masses. No reverse could crush his spirit, nor defeat reduce him to despair—equally erect and dauntless in prosperity or adversity. When successful, he moved to the accomplishment of his purposes with severe resolution. When defeated, he rallied his broken bands around him, and from his eagle eye shot along their ranks the contagion of his own courage. Destined for a leader, he everywhere asserted his destiny. In his long and eventful life he came in contact with men of all ranks and professions, but he never felt that he was in the presence of a man superior to himself. In the assemblies of the people—at the bar—in the Senate—everywhere within the circle of his personal presence, he assumed and maintained a position of prominence. But the supremacy of Mr. Clay as a party leader was not his only nor highest title to renown—that title is to be found in the purely patriotic spirit which on great occasions always signalised his conduct. We have had no statesman who, in times of real imminent public peril, has exhibited a more genuine and enlarged patriotism than Henry Clay. Whenever a question presented itself actually threatening the existence of the Union, Mr. Clay, rising above the passions of the hour, always exerted his powers to solve it peacefully and honourably."