H. Clay

LIFE AND PUBLIC SERVICES

OF

HENRY CLAY,

DOWN TO 1848;

BY EPES SARGENT.

EDITED AND COMPLETED AT MR. CLAY'S DEATH,

BY HORACE GREELEY.

AUBURN, N. Y.:
PUBLISHED BY DERBY & MILLER.
BUFFALO: GEO. H. DERBY & CO.
GENEVA: DERBY, ORTON, & CO.

1852.

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CHAPTER I.

Henry Clay is a native of Hanover county, Virginia. He was born on the 12th of April, 1777, in a district of country familiarily known in the neighborhood as the *Slashes*. His father, a baptist clergyman, died during the revolutionary war, bequeathing a small and much-embarrassed estate and seven children, of whom Henry was the fifth, to the care of an affectionate mother. The surviving parent did not possess the means to give her sons a classical education; and the subject of our memoir received no other instruction than such as could be obtained in the log-cabin school-houses, still common in the lower parts of Virginia, at which spelling, reading, writing, and arithmetic, are taught.

In 1792, his mother, who had become united, in a second marriage, with Mr. Henry Watkins, removed to Woodford county, Kentucky, taking all her children, with the exception of Henry and his oldest brother. It was always a subject of regret with Mr. Clay, that he was deprived at so early an age of his mother's counsel, conversation, and care. She was a woman of great strength of mind, and was tenderly attached to her children.

He had been only five years old when he lost his father; and, consequently, his circumstances in early life, if not actually indigent, were such as to subject him frequently to hard manual labor. He has ploughed in cornfields, many a summer-day,

without shoes, and with no other clothes on than a pair of Osnaburg trowsers, and a coarse shirt. He has often gone to mill with grain to be ground into meal or flour; and there are those who remember his youthful visits to Mrs. Darricott's mill, on the Pamunkey river. On such occasions he generally rode a horse without a saddle, while a rope supplied the place of a bridle. But in the absence of a more splendid equipment, a bag containing three or four bushels of wheat or corn was generally thrown across the horse's back, mounted upon which the future statesman would go to mill, get the grain ground, and return with it home.

At the age of fourteen, he was placed in a small retail store, kept by Mr. Richard Denny, near the market-house in the city of Richmond. He remained here till the next year (1792), when he was transferred to the office of the clerk of the high court of chancery, Mr Peter Tinsley. There he became acquainted with the venerable Chancellor Wythe, attracted his friendly attention, and enjoyed the benefit of his instruction and conversation. The chancellor being unable to write well, in consequence of the gout or rheumatism in his right thumb, bethought himself of employing his young friend as an amanuensis. This was a fortunate circumstance for the fatherless boy. His attention was thus called to the structure of sentences, as he wrote them down from the dictation of his employer; and a taste for the study of grammar was created which was noticed and encouraged by the chancellor, upon whose recommendation he read Harris's Hermes, Tooke's Diversions of Purley, Bishop Lowth's Grammar, and other similar works.

For his handwriting, which is still remarkably neat and regular, Mr. Clay was chiefly indebted to Mr. Tinsley. Chancellor Wythe was devoted to the study of Greek. He was at one time occupied in preparing reports of his decisions, and commenting upon those of the court of appeals, by which some of his were reversed; and in this work he was assisted by his amanuensis. After the reports were published, he sent copies to Mr. Jefferson, John Adams, Samuel Adams, and others. In these copies he employed Henry Clay to copy particular passages from Greek authors, to whom references had been made. Not understand-

ing a single Greek character, the young copyist had to transcribe by imitation letter after letter.

Leaving the office of Mr. Tinsley the latter part of 1796, he went to reside with the late Robert Brooke, Esq., the attorney-general, formerly governor of Virginia. His only regular study of the law was during the year 1797, that he lived with Mr. Brooke; but it was impossible that he should not, in the daily scenes he witnessed, and in the presence of the eminent men whom he so often heard and saw, be in the way of gathering much valuable legal information. During his residence of six or seven years in Richmond, he became acquainted with all or most of the eminent Virginians of the period, who lived in that city, or were in the habit of resorting to it—with Edmond Pendleton, Spencer Roane, Chief-Justice Marshall, Bushrod Washington, Wickham, Call, Copeland, &c. On two occasions, he had the good fortune to hear Patrick Henry—once, before the circuit court of the United States for the Virginia district, on the question of the payment of the British debts; and again before the house of delegates of Virginia, on the claim of the supernumerary officers in the service of the state during the revolutionary war. Mr. Clay remembers that remarkable man, his appearance and his manner, distinctly. The impression of his eloquent powers remaining on his mind is, that their charm consisted mainly in one of the finest voices ever heard, in his graceful gesticulation, and the variety and force of expression which he exhibited in his face.

Henry Clay quitted Richmond in November, 1797, his eldest brother having died while he yet resided in that city. Bearing a license from the judges of the Virginia court of appeals to practise law, he established himself in Lexington, Kentucky. He was without patrons, without the countenance of influential friends, and destitute of the means of paying his weekly board. "I remember," says he, in his speech of June, 1842, at Lexington, "how comfortable I thought I should be, if I could make £100 Virginia money per year; and with what delight I received the first fifteen-shilling fee. My hopes were more than realized. I immediately rushed into a lucrative practice."

Before assuming the active responsibilities of his profession,

he devoted himself with assiduity several months to his legal studies. Even at that period the bar of Lexington was eminent for its ability. Among its members were George Nicholas, James Hughes, John Breckenbridge, James Brown, William Murray, and others, whose reputation was sufficient to discourage the most stout-hearted competition. But true genius is rarely unaccompanied by a consciousness of its power; and the friendless and unknown youth from Virginia fearlessly entered the field, which, to a less intrepid spirit, would have seemed preoccupied. He soon commanded consideration and respect. He was familiar with the technicalities of practice; and early habits of business and application, enabled him to effect an easy mastery of the cases intrusted to his charge. His subtle appreciation of character, knowledge of human nature, and faculties of persuasion, rendered him peculiarly successful in his appeals to a jury; and he obtained great celebrity for his adroit and careful management of criminal cases.

An anecdote is related of him about the time of his first entrance upon his profession, which shows that, notwithstanding his fine capacities, he had some native diffidence to overcome before they were fairly tested. He had joined a debating society, and at one of the meetings the vote was about to be taken upon the question under discussion, when he remarked in a low but audible whisper, that the subject did not appear to him to *have been exhausted*.

"Do not put the question yet—Mr. Clay will speak," exclaimed a member, who had overheard the half-hesitating remark.

The chairman instantly took the hint, and nodded to the young lawyer in token of his readiness to hear what he had to say. With every indication of extreme embarrassment, he rose, and in his confusion, began by saying: "*Gentlemen of the jury*"—unconsciously addressing his fellow-members as the tribunal, to which he had perhaps often made imaginary appeals in his dreams of a successful debût at the bar. His audience did not add to his agitation by seeming to notice it, and, after floundering and blushing for a moment or two, and stammering out a repetition of the words, "Gentlemen of the jury," he suddenly shook off all

in 1781, at Hagerstown, Maryland, being four years younger than her husband. They have had eleven children, six daughters and five sons, and a larger number of grandchildren. Four of the daughters died young. Susan Hart, then Mrs. Duralde, of New Orleans, died at the age of twenty. Ann Brown Clay, born in 1807, married James Erwine, Esq., of New Orleans; and is said to have borne a great resemblance to her father in her captivating, social, and intellectual qualities. She died in 1835, the last of the six. The news of her death so affected Mr. Clay, that he fainted on receiving the communication. The affliction of the bereavement was most bitter.

Theodore Wythe Clay, the eldest son, was born in 1802. In consequence of an accidental injury, he became deranged, and has been for many years the inmate of an insane retreat. Thomas Hart Clay, the second son, born in 1803, is married and has a family. He is engaged chiefly in the manufacture of hemp. Henry Clay, Jr., born in 1811, fell at Buena-Vista, gallantly leading his men, February, 1847. James B. Clay, born in 1817, is married and in the practice of the law at Lexington. John M. Clay, the youngest of the family, born in 1821, has also been educated for the legal profession.

The virtues of Mrs. Clay, though of the unobtrusive kind, are not the less admirable and deserving. Her benevolence, her industry, her studious attention to her household and her guests, have been the theme of eulogy with all who have visited Ashland. When General Bertrand, the faithful friend of Napoleon, was there, he was much astonished at the extent and variety of the duties discharged with so much activity and system by Mrs. Clay. Her dairy, garden, greenhouse, pleasure-grounds, and the operations of a farm of between five and six hundred acres, were all under her vigilant and comprehensive supervision.

In his domestic and social relations, no man could be more strictly honorable and blameless than Mr. Clay. The charge has been brought against him by his enemies, of having visited the gaming-table. It is admitted that, in early life, Mr. Clay had a fondness for play—not for the sake of the money sported, but for the company and the excitement. He has never played at a public table or at gambling-houses. *For upward of thirty years*