



IN THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART NEW YORK CITY

HENRY CLAY

FROM A PAINTING BY S. F. B. MORSE



**H**ENRY CLAY was known as the Mill Boy of the Slashes, for he was born on April 12, 1777, in a district known as "The Slashes," in Hanover County, Virginia. His father was a Baptist clergyman, who died when Henry was only four years old, leaving his widowed mother in poor circumstances. Henry received

the nickname of the Mill Boy because he often was sent to a mill in the neighborhood to have corn ground for the Clay family.

Henry's mother was evidently a woman of spirit, for it is said that during the Revolution, when John Tarleton of the British visited her home and threw a handful of gold and silver on the table in payment for property taken by his men, she disdainfully swept up the coin and threw it into the fire.

Mrs. Clay married a second time, the age of fourteen Henry Clay was placed in a small retail store in Richmond, Virginia; but within a year his talents so aroused the admiration of his stepfather, Captain Henry Watkins, that he secured for the lad a place in the office of the clerk of the High Court of Chancery. This was his first real entrance to public life. He is described as being at the time tall and rawboned, with a face that was plain but pleasing. At the court Clay attracted the attention of Chancellor Wythe, who employed him as a secretary.

Then in 1796 Henry Clay began to study law with Robert Brooke, attorney general of Virginia. A year later he obtained a license to practise law and moved to Lexington, Kentucky.

Conditions of civilization were not very high there, though Kentucky was no longer the "dark and bloody ground" of Daniel Boone and the Indians with whom he fought. Lexington, however, was a center, and Clay soon won, through his captivating manners and striking eloquence, a high place among the lawyers there. All the time he was reading and studying. He absorbed knowledge and made the most of his opportunities.

Clay was particularly successful in criminal cases. He was remarkably eloquent, and he excelled at sarcasm. On one occasion a member of the House of Representatives, who was noted for his long drawn speeches, said to Clay: "You speak for the present generation; I speak for posterity." "Yes," replied Clay, "and you seem resolved to continue speaking until your audience arrives."

Clay was very popular, and almost immediately after his arrival at Lexington his political career began. A convention was to be elected to revise the Constitution of Kentucky, and Clay was made a member of this, at the age of twenty-two. In the same year he married Lucretia Hart, the daughter of a prominent citizen of Kentucky. Four years later he was elected to the Kentucky Legislature. In 1806 he was appointed to an unexpired term in the United States Senate. When

he took his seat, on December 29, 1806, he still lacked just three months and fourteen days of the age of thirty years, which the Constitution prescribes as the legal condition of eligibility for the Senate; but this does not seem to have interfered with his plunging immediately into the debates, —which was contrary to all tradition.

Clay again served in the Kentucky Legislature during the years 1808 to 1809. In the winter of 1809 he was once more sent to the United States Senate to fill an unexpired term of two years. When his term expired he was elected a member of Congress; and on November 4, 1811, was chosen Speaker of the House. Just at this time the United States was on the verge of war with Great Britain. Clay was very active in promoting the war. As Speaker of the House he arranged the important committees so as to keep them under control of the war party, and he himself made speeches in favor of placing a large army at the disposition of the President. When the question was asked, "What are we to gain by war?" he replied firmly: "What are we not to lose by peace?—commerce, character, a nation's best treasure, honor." His was a clarion call to the young republic. During the War of 1812 Clay vigorously sustained the administration, and some of his speeches electrified the country. In 1813 he was reelected Speaker. He resigned on January 19, 1814, as he had been appointed by President Madison a member of a commission to negotiate peace with Great Britain. He joined in signing the peace at Ghent, in the Netherlands, on December 24, 1814. From Ghent Clay went to Paris and thence to London, to negotiate, with John Quincy Adams and Albert Gallatin, a treaty of commerce with England.

When he returned to the United States, Clay was elected to the House of Representatives and again chosen Speaker. He was reelected in 1817, and once more chosen Speaker in 1819. During this and the following year he took an important part in the struggle in Congress concerning the admission of Missouri as a slave State. He was the father of the second Missouri Compromise of 1821, by which the admission of Missouri was at last effected. This disposition to compromise gave him the title of "The Great Pacificator." After Congress adjourned, Clay decided to retire to private life, to devote himself to his legal practice. But the people realized that the country needed his services, and sent him back to Congress, where he was again chosen Speaker.