

CASSIUS M. CLAY

by

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## CASSIUS MARCELLUS CLAY

This paper is about Cassius Marcellus Clay, not the boxer who later changed his name to Mohammed Ali, but the Kentucky Emancipator, who fought a great, and politically incorrect, battle that men like the boxer might be free. Bill Townsend, who grew up near Clay's home in Madison County soon after the great man's death, said when he heard people speak of Clay, it was always that he was "a damned rascal, a damned cradle robber, a damned nigger stealer, and a damned Republican." As Townsend said, "the nouns changed, but the adjective always remained the same."<sup>1</sup>

On November 14, 1894, the following article appeared in the local papers around Richmond and Lexington, and its gist was copied all over the country and even in Europe:

Cassius Marcellus Clay, the warrior, the abolitionist, the diplomat. General Clay, aged 84, was married to his pretty protégé, aged 15, at White Hall at ten o'clock yesterday morning. The second childhood of Cassius Marcellus Clay, if this be his present state, does not prevent him from being a conspicuous figure of American history. While in his younger days he was a veritable gladiator in the exciting arena of abolition, while in his mature manhood he served his country in the halls of St. Petersburg as the American representative to that mighty nation, he is far happier today than he was receiving the plaudits of four million slaves whose shackles he had helped to loosen, or listening to the adulation of the courtiers in the American legation at Russia's capitol.

When I arrived at White Hall yesterday morning about 9:30 o'clock after a long cold buggy ride over the hills and through the valleys bordering on the Kentucky River,

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<sup>1</sup>Townsend, The Lion of White Hall, p. 8.

I was met at the front door, which is a beautifully carved wild cherry with knobs of solid coin silver, by a handsome dark complexioned, spare built young man of medium height, who politely inquired who I was, and upon being told that I was a newspaper reporter and recognizing me from a previous visit some time ago, he conducted me down the wide hall to the library. As we entered the large richly furnished room, with shelves along one entire side running to ceiling and filled with books, oil portraits in heavy gold frames and rare tapestries hanging on the other three sides, the old General was busily engaged in replenishing the wood which snapped and blazed cheerfully from the big fireplace. Laying down his poker I was greeted by this white bearded old man with as much cordiality as was ever extended to a royal visitor. "You have met my son Lawnie, have you not?" said he waving to the young man who stood beside me. Nodding my head I thought it time to explain my intrusion, so I quickly stated to the General that the American people through me their reporter and representative, desired to attend this wedding which I understood was to take place that morning, I waited with my heart in my mouth as the old man hesitated a moment, but I immediately relaxed when he smiled and said, "Well, I will say to you what Blaine said to the committee that waited on him and asked him if he would receive the people who wished to see him. Blaine replied that if the people wanted to see him, he supposed he would have to see the people. If the people, after all these years, have that much interest in me, then I will have to be accomodating." So saying the old General walked over to a large walnut chest and brought old Bourbon out. While he mixed himself a light toddy: despite other excesses Cassius Clay has always been a most temperate user of alcohol: your reporter took a heavy straight, thereby stopping in their tracks the chills and shivers running over him from his twenty-three mile ride. Mr. Clay said that his children, meaning his children by Mary Jane Warfield Clay, had placed every possible obstacle in the way of his marriage. He said, "they persuaded my old friend, Judge John Chenault not to marry me. I then asked Squire Green B. Million, but he refused. Yesterday I suspected that my former friends and relatives might get an injunction restraining me from marrying Miss Richardson. They thought they had caught me like a rat in a trap. So" he continued, "I determined to thwart their designs, and after dark last night I armed McClellan Richardson, a brother of Dora, and Barlow Clark, one of my farm hands, and sent them eighteen miles into the foothills to Squire Isaac Newton Douglas who is a good

Christian, a kind hearted gentleman, and one who sympathizes with me in my troubles. The squire got up out of bed and rode all night on horseback over the roughest dirt roads and trails so he might get here this morning. He has just finished washing up and scraping off the mud and is now having a bite of breakfast in the kitchen. When he is ready, the ceremony will then take place." In a few minutes, Squire Douglas, a man of a good deal of unconscious simple dignity, came from the direction of the kitchen into the room. With him was Dr. Smith, a physician of Richmond, Kentucky, and a collateral relative of the General, and McClellan Richardson, brother of Dora, a sturdy man of about thirty years of age obviously of the tenant class. From their arrival the old General disappeared through the dining room door and immediately returned leading his bride-elect by the hand.

Several months past fifteen years of age, Dora Richardson, daughter of a deceased sawmill worker of nearby Valley View, tall for her age, and decidedly mature in physical appearance, hardly looks the child she is. She wore no gloves, no orange blossoms and carried no bride's roses in her hand. She has a pleasant rather striking face, but her cheekbones are too prominent for real beauty, and she is altogether rustic in her appearance and manner. The scene was a touching one, never before and probably never again to be equaled in American life. The strangely paired couple stood quietly expectant as the squire thumbed awkwardly through his battered prayer book. A huge stick of wood burned in two and the fire flared a little, lighting the bindings of the fine books, the gilded picture frames and especially the exquisite copper engravings of Grand Duke Alexis and his beautiful Princess, warmly inscribed by each of them and presented to General Clay at their own wedding day at which he was an honored guest. Upon the death of Alexander the Second which occurred quite a while ago, the Grand Duke had become Alexander the Third, Emperor of the Russias, and his princess the Empress. Yesterday across the thousands of miles of land and sea, according to the Cincinnati Enquirer which I carried in my overcoat pocket, the dead body of General Clay's royal friend was passing through the densely crowded streets of St. Petersburg to the Cathedral of Lowadia where his funeral was to be held with great pomp and ceremony, an event which I have since learned from the telegraph, vies with this marriage on the front pages of this morning's metropolitan newspapers. The ceremony began, and the man who had led thousands to victory in a crusade for human liberty, who had joyously faced death in innumerable personal hand-to-



hand encounters, who in his youth the perfect Apollo in appearance, if not a Napoleon in the cause of freedom, whose portrait then hung in the palace of the dead Emperor, stood as meekly as a little child with an expression of unspeakable happiness upon his time worn but still fresh and almost youthful features. By his side stood that simple country girl, as shy as a gazelle, knowing as little of the great world in which her venerable husband had played so conspicuous a part as the most untutored daughter of nature. The ceremony was very brief, and when it was over the General gave her a vigorous kiss which she bashfully but willingly returned. In another moment she had disappeared through the dining room door and Dr. Smith and I sat down before the fire listening, with rapt interest, to the General's reminiscences of his days in Russia, which came floating back upon him when I showed him the newspaper account of the Emperor's funeral.

As I got up to go, I asked General Clay if I could take a picture of his young bride. His expressive face darkened up instantly and he replied, "No, she is not dressed for that. Her hair is not fixed in the fashionable mode. You see, she has no mother, nobody to fix her hair up like other girls are fixed. She never had a picture taken," continued the General, "and when she does, she is going to be fixed up with nice clothes and her hair properly dressed." He readily assented to my request for his own photograph and obligingly stood against the large magnolias while the picture was being taken. He is in excellent health, erect and muscular as an Indian, and bids fair to live many years if he will only quit fighting. He walked with me to the door, talking in his agreeable and courtly way. My rather hefty hand was lost and helpless in the grasp of that enormous paw now so gently, which has laid such violent hold upon so many luckless adversaries. "Goodby, my young friend," he said, "tell all my friends and also my enemies," there was just a fleeting grimace in his smile, "that I love my little bride better than any woman I ever saw. She is a good, virtuous girl, and I believe she will make me a good and loyal wife."

Some think the old General is crazy, but I do not think so. His mind is as clear as a bell. I do not even think he is in his second childhood, but if he is I shall hereafter have no fear of growing old.<sup>2</sup>

The bridegroom in this ceremony was the son of General Green Clay, one of the largest land-and slave-holders in the Bluegrass and by both birth and inheritance belonged to the elite of Kentucky. His third cousin, Henry Clay, was a successful lawyer who was beginning his meteoric rise in national politics and whose political ideas his younger cousin supported vigorously. Those ideas, later called "The American System," included: a sound national banking system, the sale of Western lands with the money distributed to the states for the purpose of internal improvements (primarily transportation), and the encouragement of industry by a high tariff.<sup>3</sup> Cassius Clay received an excellent education at Transylvania and Yale Universities. The year he spent at Yale (he left after a year, writing to his brother that he had been to school "long enough to make any man an artificial if not a natural fool")<sup>4</sup> proved to be the defining point in his life. It did not come in the classroom, but in his acquaintance with the abolitionist, William Lloyd Garrison, and his observation of the progress and prosperity of the Northern economy as compared to Kentucky and the Southland. Clay became convinced that slavery was an economic and social burden that enslaved the owners and ruined the free laborer. He was not ever an abolitionist or a moralist on the issue. He was against slavery on purely economic grounds. He never changed.

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<sup>3</sup>Smiley, Lion of White Hall, pp. 22-27.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 21.

He was a bulldog. When Cassius Clay believed something, he believed wholeheartedly and the world soon knew about it. His adamant opposition to slavery included the equally firm belief that it should only be opposed by legal and Constitutional means. A North Carolinian, Hinton Helper, also wrote an effective indictment of slavery on economic grounds, but Helper was largely ignored as a "sour grapes" outsider deviant from the non-slaveholding class. Clay was especially feared and hated because he bored from within the very group he most bitterly opposed.

Clay married Mary Jane Warfield, daughter of a wealthy and influential Lexington family and had his first physical confrontation with one of her former suitors. When he learned that Dr. John Declary had maligned him, his code of honor required restitution. He caned him. Declary then challenged Clay to a duel, but Clay declined, being on his honeymoon, declaring that the interruption was "too absurd even for the fool code."<sup>5</sup> He later challenged Declary, who fled and committed suicide.<sup>6</sup>

Emancipationist conviction, devotion to the law, and a touchy sense of honor became the hallmarks of Cassius Clay's character. He entered politics naturally, and was twice elected to the Kentucky Legislature, but his opposition to the overwhelmingly predominate "slavocracy" soon made him a political pariah.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Richardson, Cassius Marcellus Clay, p. 30.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 49.

In 1840, Clay ran against Robert Wickliffe, Jr., son of the "Old Duke," the largest slaveholder in the state and the leader of the pro-slavery forces. The issue was the re-opposing peal of a law ~~fixing~~ the importation of slaves to the state. This resulted in a duel with Wickliffe, in which both parties missed.<sup>8</sup> Three years later, in another campaign (one wonders why Clay continued to run for office), a debate at Russell's Cave resulted in Clay's being called a liar by Samuel M. Brown. Clay headed toward Brown while drawing his ever-present Bowie knife. Brown shot him point-blank with a pistol. Clay then cut him on the scalp and shoulder, gouged out an eye, and picked him up and threw him down a bank. Brown's bullet had struck the metal scabbard of the Bowie knife, leaving a large bruise.<sup>9</sup> The hostile forces saw to it that Clay was indicted for mayhem. Henry Clay defended his cousin in court. His proration concluded with:

Standing as he did, without aiders or abettors, and without popular sympathy, with the fatal pistol of conspired murderers pointed at his heart, would you have him meanly and cowardly fly? or would you have him do just what he did? And if he had not, he would not have been worthy of the name he bears.<sup>10</sup>

The jury agreed, and Clay was acquitted. Not long afterward, Clay further enhanced his reputation by publishing

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<sup>8</sup>Smiley, op. cit., p. 52.

<sup>9</sup>Richardson, op. cit., p. 36.

<sup>10</sup>Smiley, op. cit., p. 63.



a small pamphlet entitled, "How to Kill a Man with a Bowie Knife."

By 1844, Cassius Clay was well-known and adored by the anti-slavery forces of the North, and feared and despised by the pro-slavery forces, who brooked no opposition in the South. The Whig Party nominated Henry Clay for President, and tried desperately to straddle what was fast becoming the political issue. Cassius Clay stumped the North for the Whigs and was received triumphantly, but every Northern vote for Henry cost him votes in the South, and he lost.

Back home in Lexington, in 1845, Cassius Clay, whose articles were refused by the local papers, decided to publish an anti-slavery paper in Lexington. That he could even think about such a thing at that place and time would be like publishing a Communist paper at the height of the McCarthy era. Clay called his paper The True American. He set up a printing office on the second floor of a Mill Street building. He purchased two small brass cannon, loaded them with scrap iron, and placed them on the landing. He armed his men with muskets and then, for good measure, made bombs of two kegs of gunpowder.<sup>11</sup> He then proceeded to declare war on slavery. He eventually secured around 3400 subscribers, 700 in Kentucky.<sup>12</sup> In August, Clay was laid low

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<sup>11</sup>Smiley, op. cit., p. 82.

<sup>12</sup>Richardson, op. cit., p. 46.

by typhoid. The good citizens of Lexington took advantage of the situation to dismantle his press and ship it to Cincinnati, something they had prudently refrained from doing earlier.<sup>13</sup>

Clay opposed the extension of slavery by the annexation of Texas, but when it resulted in war with Mexico, he promptly enlisted in "the Old Infantry Cavalry" as was elected its captain.<sup>14</sup> He spent eight months as a prisoner of war, and when he returned to Lexington he was hailed as a hero and presented with a fine jewelled sword.<sup>15</sup> Lexingtonians abhorred his anti-slavery views, but he was, after all, one of them. His voice was virtually the only one permitted in the South from 1830 on. This doesn't mean his life became any easier. In an 1849 political campaign at Foxtown, not far from Clay's home at White Hall, his neighbor Cyrus Turner had a pistol, snapped it point blank at Clay three times, and it failed to fire. In the melee, Clay was shot and he stabbed Turner. Turner died. Clay lived, but lost the campaign 3700 votes to 688.<sup>15</sup>

In the early 1850s, Clay supported the Free Soil Party, and when the Republican Party was organized, he was one of the leaders.<sup>16</sup> He campaigned hard for Lincoln in 1860,

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<sup>13</sup>Smiley, op. cit., pp.96-99.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 116.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 142.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 159.

and as a result, expected a post in the new administration. He was appointed Ambassador to Russia which, of all European nations, was the strongest supporter of the North in the Civil War.

Clay proved to be an excellent Ambassador in the court of the Tsars at St. Petersburg. The Russians, favorably disposed anyway, greatly admired his direct manner and he fit into Russian aristocratic society with ease. Sometimes, too much ease. The ladies were attracted to him and he reciprocated. An irate Russian noble once met him at dinner and slapped his face with his glove, intending it as a challenge to a duel. Clay simply rose, doubled his fist, and knocked the man winding. That ended the affair.<sup>17</sup> In 1862, the charter of the Russian Fur Company expired. It had been subleased to England's Hudson's Bay Company until 1867, but there were two problems: The Fur Company was unprofitable, and England was Russia's enemy at that time.<sup>18</sup> Clay was not primarily responsible, but was quite effective in the subsequent purchase of Alaska by the United States.<sup>19</sup> With the exception of a year (1862) Clay served as Ambassador to Russia until 1869.<sup>20</sup> It was during this time his wife, Mary Jane Warfield Clay, who did not return to Russia with him in 1863, supervised the building of the present mansion at

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<sup>17</sup>Smiley, op. cit., p. 182.

<sup>18</sup>Robertson, A Kentuckian at the Court of the Tsars, pp. 228-29.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 232.

<sup>20</sup>Richardson, op. cit., p. 102.

White Hall, which was so magnificently restored during the administration of Governor Louie B. Nunn, whose wife took a special interest in the project. In the absence of his wife, Clay found some consolation in his friendship with the Tsarevitch Alexei, who would become Tsar Alexander III, with the Tsar Liberator, Alexander II, who freed the Russian serfs by a series of ukases in the 1860s, and, not least important, the ballerina Anna Petrov.<sup>21</sup>

After his return to the United States in 1869, Clay found his wife cool and his politics passe. Mary Jane took the children and moved to Lexington, leaving the now-old man literally to suffer the cold at White Hall.<sup>22</sup> It didn't help matters a lot when, one evening in 1876, a carriage drove up to White Hall and a mysterious lady deposited a boy of about ten or eleven with the announcement she had brought Clay his Russian son.<sup>23</sup> Clay received the boy, Lawnie (or Leonid) graciously and always seemed mildly mystified that Mary Jane took offense. Clay and his wife were divorced shortly thereafter.<sup>24</sup> Clay formally adopted and raised the boy to adulthood.

About that time, Clay's nephew, William Cassius Goodloe, who had accompanied him to Russia, got into a scrape with Col. Armistead Swope. Swope shot and killed Goodloe

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<sup>21</sup>Richardson, op. cit., p. 102.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 115.

<sup>23</sup>Smiley, op. cit., p. 204.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 221.



on the street near the Phoenix Hotel in Lexington, and Goodloe, before he died stabbed and killed Swope with a Bowie knife. Clay grieved for his favorite nephew, but later talking to his lawyer he said, with tears in his eyes, "Jerry, I couldn't have done better myself."<sup>25</sup>

Clay joined Mars Henry Watterson of Louisville, Henry Grady of Atlanta, and Horace Greeley in the Reform wing of the Republican party in the 1870s and '80s, but he was no longer a key player in a great drama and he grew bored and lonesome at White Hall. This eventually, in 1894, when Clay was 84 years of age,<sup>led</sup> to the marriage recounted in the beginning of this paper. It was, as has been pointed out, bitterly opposed by his family. They secured an injunction from the judge and a posse comitatus was organized to serve it on the old Lion. Upon his return, the Sheriff submitted the following account:

Richmond, Kentucky, November 14, 1894

Judge John C. Chenault, Dear Judge,  
I am reportin' about the posse like you said I had to. Judge, we went out to White Hall but we didn't do no good. It was a mistake to go out there with only seven men. Judge, the General was awful mad. He got to cussin' and a-shootin', and we had to shoot back. The old general sure did object to bein' arrested. Don't let nobody tell you he didn't, and we had to shoot. I thought we hit him two or three times, but don't guess we did.

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<sup>25</sup>Townsend, op. cit., p. 30.

He didn't act like it. We come out right good considerin'. I'm having some misery from two splinters of wood in my side. Dick Collier was hurt a little when his shirt tail and britches was shot off by a piece of horse shoe and nails that come out of that old cannon. Have you seen Jack? He wrenched his neck and shoulder when his horse throw'd him as we were gettin' away. Judge, I think you'll have to go to Frankfort and see Brown. If he could send Captain Longmire up here with two light fielders, he could divide his men, send some with the cannon around to the front of the house, not too close, and the others around through the corn-field and up around the cabins and spring house to the back porch, I think this might do it.

Respectfully, Josiah P. Simmons, High sheriff.<sup>26</sup>

Needless to say, the wedding went off smoothly. It lasted until 1898, when there was an amicable divorce. Dora then married a local laborer, Riley Brock, and, surprisingly, Clay hired them both, Dora to be his housekeeper and Brock his foreman. With the appropriate passage of time, Dora bore a son named Cassius Clay Brock.<sup>27</sup>

The old man grew so lonely in the huge house. Sometimes he had only the flies and insects to keep him company, but he didn't like flies. His manservant said one night Clay, propped in bed, summoned him and asked for his shotgun. He thereupon took careful aim and scattered a big horsefly over a sizable part of the ceiling above him.<sup>28</sup>

A terrible windstorm swept over the Bluegrass on the night of July 22, 1903. It blew roofs off of barns and

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<sup>26</sup>Townsend, op. cit., pp. 42,43.

<sup>27</sup>Smiley, op. cit., p. 241.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 245.

stables. Thunder rolled down the valleys and lightening made the inhabitants cringe. A bolt struck the lofty statue of Henry Clay in the Lexington Cemetery, knocking its head to the ground, and at White Hall, around 9:30, the old Lion of Whitehall died peacefully in his sleep, the handle of his "dress-up" Bowie knife peeking out from under his pillow.<sup>29</sup> The world he helped create had left him some years before, but not until he had left his own indelible mark upon it.

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<sup>29</sup>Smiley, op. cit., p. 245.

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