

BOOK II.

The Golden Age of American Oratory

OF what may be called the critical periods in the history of the United States, there have been two which stand pre-eminent in the development of oratory as in other respects. The first of these was the period of unrest and social and political turmoil which led to the war of the Revolution and to the formation of the Constitution. The second was the period of equal disturbance which had its outcome in the Civil War. In both cases a conflict of words preceded that of arms. The voice of the orator was the weapon employed, and a long contest on the rostrum preceded the appeal to arms. With the first of these periods we have already dealt. The second was dominated by two exciting political problems, the tariff question and the slavery controversy. The first of these led to the attempted secession from the Union of South Carolina. Its most notable result, so far as oratory is concerned, was the famous Congressional debate between Daniel Webster and Robert Y. Hayne, the grandest verbal passage-at-arms in American history. The other subject of controversy was more extended; continuing for forty years, during which the halls of Congress rang with arguments of fiery contestants; and ending in actual war when logic and argument had failed to smooth the waves of hostile feeling. This period has been well denominated "The Golden Age of American Oratory." It gave rise to such giants in debate as Clay, Webster, Calhoun, and added to the literature of oratory many brilliant examples of the speaker's art.