GEORGE W. CABLE.

THE charge that we have no characteristic American literature has hardly been a just one, both because there always has been much that was characteristic in our best writings, and because our writers, with a few notable exceptions, have necessarily been, first of all, English—in language, in tradition, and in habit of thought—and, as writers, American only because of certain accidental surroundings. These surroundings themselves, in spite of an American origin and character, were still marked with a strong English quality. "America," as we know it at the North and East, is mainly a newer England, where the social and mental qualities of the older have been modified and adapted to new conditions without losing their original impulse and stamp.

Far away in the South-west, born of purely French enterprise, strongly modified by Spanish association and control, heated with the glow of a subtropical sky, lulled and intoxicated with the delusive curse of slavery, secluded behind the defenses of restricted speech which slavery built for itself everywhere, and allied to the American family of States by ties which long failed to touch its real heart, there has grown up at our side a community in which English influence has found no place, and which has hitherto been subjected to only a distant and purely external study. A keen and sympathetic eye has studied it at last, and the wealth of its material is being laid before us, warm with the touch of the Southern sun, and throbbing with a life that is new to our colder zone. If we had had no characteristic literature before, we surely have one now; and if it were ever safe to predict permanent favor for a writer, we should claim it for the author who has so allied himself to all the varied humanity he has depicted that his name must live as long as interest in the picturesque and plaintive creole survives.

Were we to ask the source of such skill and success, it would be an easy begging of the question to say that Mr. Cable is a genius, and that genius is its own creator. A somewhat intimate study of the man himself, and of the methods of his work as well as its results, shows that while he unquestionably is a genius, his genius has been trained to walk in a very strait path, and to submit to very rigid discipline. The God-given quality is there, and its mettle and freak and force are always felt, yet we feel almost equally the wholesome subjection in which it is held. It is like a weanling race-horse trained to serious work and made to lead a useful life,—the native spirit and vim always evident, but always controlled by wisely accepted restraints. Given the divine spark, without which no friction can produce light, we find the remaining factors of Mr. Cable's success in his surroundings and necessities, and in the spirit in which he has met them. Not a little of his peculiar quality, and very much of his peculiar development, may be traced to the Puritan element in his composition—a Puritanism inherited, cultivated, and stalwart, but a Puritanism mellowed by the sunny sky under which he has grown, humanized by the open and cordial habit of Southern life, and made wise and forbearing and discreet—almost made not to be Puritanism at all—by an all-embracing and ever-vigilant sense of humor, which is as quick to check his own act as to catch his neighbor's lapse; a sense of humor which ripples at every shoaling of the serious stream of his life and work.

Resolute, earnest, laborious to the last degree, and so trained to toil that no detail of research or execution deters him; with a mind schooled to the minuter systems of the counting-room; with an ear ever alert for characteristic expression or dialect; with a quick eye for shades of manner, and with an unfailing memory for what he sees and hears, he has passed his life among the people of New Orleans, gleaning, as he went his busy way, for the sheaves he now presents us. While thus equipped for his calling, he evidently recognizes his own limitations, and works well within his powers. He has made a special study of the creole population in and about his native city, and of the conditions under which that city has grown,—finding in its later colonial and earlier territorial life his most congenial field of work—a field he has made so much his own that another writer poaching upon it would probably be warned off by the public as an imitator.

Personally, Mr. Cable is a small, slight, fragile-looking man, thirty-seven years old. He is erect, bright and frank, with a strong head, and a refined, gentle face. His hair and beard are dark, and his large hazel eyes are expressive,—happily more often of merriment than of sadness, though they are capable of becoming sad eyes, too.

A young author should be accorded the privilege of having his more intimate biog-

raphy withheld until his career is finished, but it can be no unwelcome invasion of Mr. Cable's privacy to say that he is happily married, that he has four charming little girls, and that he lives in a high-porched, broad-verandahed house, somewhat after the manner of the Grandissimes' mansions we know so well, and situated far up in the "Garden District" of New Orleans.

What is of more legitimate interest to the public, and more important as a study of character, is the combination of inheritances and of circumstances which have helped to make him what he is. He is descended on the father's side from a colonial Virginia family, and on the mother's from the old New England stock. The two branches came together in Indiana, where his father and mother were married in 1834, and whence they moved to New Orleans after the financial crisis of 1837. In New Orleans, Mr. Cable prospered in commercial pursuits until some time after the birth of the subject of this sketch. In 1859, after a second disastrous failure, the father died, leaving the family so reduced in their circumstances that young Cable was obliged to leave school at the age of fourteen to aid in their support. From this time until 1863 he was usually employed as a clerk. Although then in his nineteenth year, he was such a tiny and youthful-looking lad that his sisters, when sent beyond the lines for refusing to take the oath of allegiance, had no difficulty in obtaining permission to take their "little brother" with them. Once within the Confederacy, the valiant youth soon volunteered, and was mustered into Colonel Wilburn's Fourth Mississippi Cavalry, of General Wirt Adams's brigade. The experiences of the field and the rude life of the camp produced a marked change in the hitherto gay disposition of the young recruit. He is described as having been a good soldier, scrupulously observant of discipline, always at his post, and always courageous and daring. During days of inactivity, he employed his leisure hours in making a critical study of the Bible, in working out problems in the higher branches of mathematics, and in keeping up his knowledge of Latin grammar. In one of his engagements he received a serious wound in the left armpit, making a narrow escape with his life.

At the end of the war, like most of his comrades, he returned penniless to New Orleans, a city then overflowing with young men, clamorous for employment. He began his career as errand-boy in a mercantile house. Subsequently, for a time, he found employment at Kosciusko, Mississippi. Returning to New Orleans several months later, he took up the study of civil engineering, and joined a State surveying expedition for the reëstablishment of the lines and levels of levees along the banks of the Atchafalaya River. The most important outcome of this enterprise, so far as Mr. Cable was concerned, was a very serious attack of malarial fever, from which he did not fully recover for two years. During his convalescence, he became an enthusiastic student of natural history, and laid the foundation for those close descriptions of bayou and prairie and swamp life, and still-life, which are such a marked feature of his writings.

Mr. Cable's first attempt at literary work was in the capacity of a contributor, over the signature of "Drop-Shot," to a special column of the New Orleans "Picayune," devoted to critical and humorous papers, with an occasional poem. These contributions, which at first appeared but once a week, became, later on, a daily feature of the paper, and Mr. Cable was regularly attached to its editorial staff. In this field he developed originality, and vigor and delicacy of expression. His newspaper career was, however, destined to be brief. In accepting the position, he had stipulated that he should not be called upon to write theatrical notices, as attendance at places of dramatic entertainment involved a moral question which he had not investigated, and which was condemned by the stricter rules of the Presbyterian church, of which he was and is an active member. On an urgent occasion it was considered necessary to instruct him to take charge of the theatrical column of the paper. This he positively refused to do, and as soon as his services could be spared, he was informed that they were no longer required.

Soon after this, he accepted the position of accountant and corresponding clerk of the firm of William C. Black & Co., cotton factors, a successful and conservative house, which he continued to serve for several years, and of which he became the trusted representative. He retained this position until the sudden death of the head of the firm, in 1879. In addition to his office duties, he acted as secretary to Mr. Black in various offices of trust, especially in the treasurership of the New Orleans Cotton Exchange, and as secretary of its finance committee.

The success achieved by the sketches which first appeared in this magazine, and which are now collected in "Old Creole Days," made Mr. Cable decide to depend thenceforth mainly on his pen for his future career. Thus far, literature had been to him only a stolen industry. The earlier sketches, and much of "The Grandissimes," were written as with the left hand, while the right was busy with the invoices and the correspond-

ence of the cotton firm. In the odd moments of his busy life he jotted down, on odd scraps of paper, the conceits that grew out of his passing intercourse with creole men of business of all grades, and with the stray bits of creole life with which he was thrown in contact. With a good gift for language, and a very rare one for dialect, he has made a systematic study of creole French, of which he may be regarded as the first thorough exponent. He has been no less successful in acquiring the patois of the New Orleans negro, and the music of the curious old slave-songs. In singing these, as in rendering the speech of the creole and the negro, he evinces a talent which is at somewhat strange variance with his former prejudice against the dramatic art.

His work in this direction, as in others, has been carried on with a direct purpose, and with a success which is now yielding him good fruit. He is, and he will, probably, remain, the first authority in all matters, light or grave, relating to the people and the history of Louisiana. He would be a bold man and a resolute one who, with Cable's precedence assured, would now attempt that mastery of a slightly known dialect, without which no true portrayal of the character of this people could be possible. Probably, also, the true spirit of the creole could never be gained by one not born among them, and whose life had not been passed in close observation of their characteristics. His work has by no means been confined to speech and personal traits. It has penetrated every remote corner of the whole history of the colony, and he has gained a hard-earned familiarity with his subject, such as few writers ever consider it worth their while to achieve. For more than a year past he has devoted himself almost exclusively to the preparation of a history of New Orleans, which is now being published by the Census Office in connection with the social statistics of that city, and, except so far as relates to the mere enumeration, he has collated the statistical information himself. He might well rest his reputation for thorough and judicious historical and descriptive work on this production alone. He has gathered also the material for a census report on that curious and romantic people of the Têche and Attakapas country, who, exiled from Acadia, found a home only in far Louisiana, where, as 'Cadjiens, they still retain their original peculiarities. Charmed as he is with the brilliant color and picturesque effects that this study has developed, there is ground for the hope that a novel which he is to write before long may be laid in the land of Evangeline.

Mr. Cable has said, in "The Grandissimes," "a creole never forgives a public mention," and his work has hitherto been received by the race it has delineated in no such cordial spirit as has marked its welcome elsewhere. Much resentment has been expressed; the correctness of the portrayal has been denied, and the suspicion was aroused that a strange and unkind critic had been making free with the sacred traditions of a proud and over-sensitive people. Happily this condition is now changing, and the creoles themselves are beginning to recognize the kindly and appreciative spirit which has actuated all his dealings with them. Indeed, the better men among them, who at first resented "The Grandissimes" as an intrusion and an impertinence, realizing, at last, that it was written by a native of New Orleans and by an ex-Confederate soldier, have been penetrated by its true meaning, have seen that it was written in a spirit of reform rather than of criticism, and have expressed their hopeful satisfaction that it was written.

As was natural in the case of one exploring such an unfamiliar field, Mr. Cable has been charged by more than one of his critics with inaccuracy and exaggeration. His methods of work and his methods of thought, if not indeed his inherent character, are a perfect answer to this charge. He has carried into his study the habits and processes of the counting-room, making sure that his day-book and cash-book are quite correct before they are posted into his literary ledger, which is a complete index to his material. He works slowly and carefully, with his authorities at his elbow; mastering the details of every subject and making himself familiar with all its bearings before accepting it for his work. Nor does he stop here. Any one who has seen the earlier drafts of his writing must recognize, in his frequent erasions and interlineations, not only a search for the best methods of expression, but a desire for exact statement.

Mr. Cable's reading has been thorough rather than general. For a long time he cherished scruples against novel-reading, but this prejudice is now laid, his convictions having been completely changed by reading George MacDonald's "Annals of a Quiet Neighborhood." He is still innocent of the modern French novel. Victor Hugo, Thackeray, Tourguéneff, and Hawthorne he holds in the highest estimation. He is fond of music, and has a more than ordinary knowledge of it, and is especially given to working out the score of the songs of his favorite birds, having succeeded, after many efforts, in recording the roulade of an oriole that sings in his orange-tree.

His frank and manly treatment of the peculiar social problems of his native city has not failed to arouse a certain feeling of

antagonism. This, however, is yielding to a recognition of the real drift of his purpose. Although a Southerner, bred to the prejudices of his community, and although he has rarely been subjected to other influences, he has been able, by the sheer force of his own genius, to lift himself above his immediate surroundings and to view them with the eye of a man of the world. A friend has written of him: "What he hopes to accomplish is the amelioration of the colored race in every possible way. To this end, he would incite them to greater ambition, extend to them, through the State, every educational advantage, afford them opportunities for a fuller religious instruction, give them a more exalted idea of the sanctity of the marriage relation, and so widen their sphere of action that they may become useful, intelligent, and contented members of the community." He has shown, as in "Madame Delphine," a special tenderness for the quadroons and octoroons, who have hardly a place in the social economy. The careful reader of his works, looking beyond their humor and their dramatic and pathetic elements, must recognize a deeply-lying purpose, not only to elevate these lower orders of the community, but even more to humanize and civilize the dominant race which has suffered so deeply from its false relation to its dependents.

It is not possible, in a brief sketch like this, to give an adequate idea of the force and delicacy of Mr. Cable's writing; of his close study of creole character, of his appreciation, remarkable in a Southerner, of the underlying principles involved in the question of slavery, or of his great cleverness in handling the creole dialect. Indeed, the difficulty with which any rendering of this dialect is caught by those not familiar with French, or rather with Louisiana French, is the only serious limitation to the general popularity of his work. His rendering of creole English is perfect, and once its key is found, it becomes entirely familiar.

In his census history of New Orleans, he says of the creoles:

"Their more pronounced faults were generally those moral provincialisms which travelers recount with undue impatience; they are said to have been coarse, wasteful, vain, and they were also deficient in energy and application, and without well-directed ambition; unskillful in handicraft, doubtless entirely through negligence, and totally wanting in that community feeling which begets the study of reciprocal rights and obligations * * *. Hence, they were fonder of pleasant fictions regarding the salubrity, beauty, and advantages of their town, than of measures to justify their assumptions. Easily inflamed, they were as easily discouraged, thrown into confusion, and subdued, and they expended the best of their energies in trivial pleasures, especially the masque and the dance; yet they were kind parents, affectionate wives, tractable children, and enthusiastic patriots."

Nothing that he has written is more characteristic than these two bits from "The Grandissimes":

"'Where is the gold that came into your purse? All gone?'

"'For rice and potatoes,' said Aurore, and for the first time she uttered a genuine laugh, under that condition of mind which Latins usually substitute for fortitude.

* * * * * * *

"And one after another, under the mild coolness of Honoré's amiable disregard, their indignation trickled back from steam to water, and they went on drawing their stipends."—

Following is his explanation of the character of the *calas* vender:

"As for us, our feelings, our sentiments, affections, etc., are fine, keen, and delicate; and many what we call refined. Why? Because we get them as we get our old swords and gems and laces—from our grandsires, mothers, and all. Refined they are—after centuries of refining. But the feelings handed down to Clemence had come through ages of African savagery; through fires that do not refine, but that blunt and blast and blacken and char; starvation, gluttony, drunkenness, thirst, drowning, nakedness, dirt, fetichism, debauchery, slaughter, pestilence, and the rest—she was their heiress; they left her the cinders of human feelings. She remembered her mother. They had been separated in her childhood, in Virginia, when it was a province. She remembered with pride the price her mother had brought at auction, and remarked, as an additional interesting item, that she had never seen or heard of her since. She had had children of assorted colors—had one with her now, the black boy that brought the basil to Joseph; the others were here and there, some in the Grandissime households or field-gangs, some elsewhere within occasional sight, some dead, some not accounted for. Husbands—like the Samaritan woman's. We know she was a constant singer and laugher."

The following relates to the sad and silent "f. m. c." ("free man of color"):

"And the other, with that grave and gentle economy of words which made his speech so unique, recounted what we amplify."

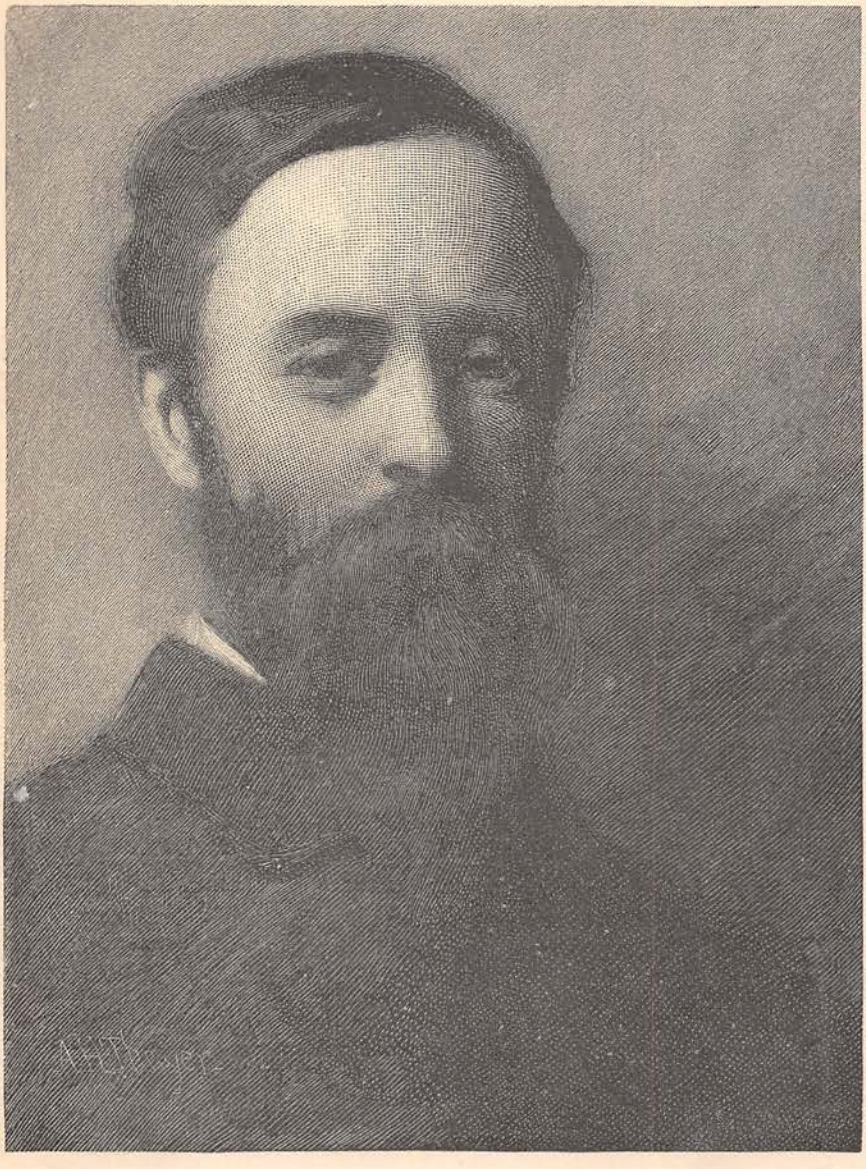
This bit grows out of Mr. Raoul Innerarity's curiosity as to how much Doctor Keene thought he had got for his picture of "Louisiana 'Rif-fusing to h-anter' the Union":

"'Well, how much?'

"'Two 'ondred fifty.' He laid himself out at length, his elbow on the deck, his head in his hand. 'I believe I'm sorry I sole 'er.'

"'I don't wonder. How's Honoré? Tell me what has happened. Remember, I've been away five months.'

"'No; I am verrie glad dat I sole 'er. What? Ha! I should think so! If it have not had been fo' dat, I would not be married to-day. You think I would get married on dat sal'rie w'at Proffis-or Frowenfel' was payin' me? Twenty-five dolla' de mont'? Docta Keene, no gen'leman h-ought to git married if 'e 'ave not anny'ow fifty dolla' de mont'! If I wasn' a h-artiz I wouldn' git married, I gie you my word.'"



Yours truly
G. W. Cable