MIDDLE GEORGIA RURAL LIFE.

IT has been asked why comparatively so many published character-sketches of the South have originated in the State of Georgia. In the opinion of the writer of this article, other causes besides accidental ones have operated in this behalf, and he purposes to suggest some of them.

Middle Georgia (for such contributions have come almost without exception from this region), settled by immigrants from the older States, chiefly Virginia and North Carolina, was found to be as salubrious as fertile. Its undulations of wide uplands and narrow lowlands watered by swiftly running small rivers and creeks, its thick forests beneath which was a soil radiant with redness and teeming with fecundity, made it as pleasant an abode for man as any in the whole South. Therein families of various degrees of culture and property got homesteads, not many less than two hundred, and fewer more than one thousand, acres. Almost every one owned one or two, almost none more than fifty, slaves. Fewer distinctions were among their dwelling-houses. The salubrity of the climate made settlements almost everywhere equally secure. Therefore those of all conditions became close neighbors of one another, and intimacies necessarily arose destined to produce important results variant, not only from those in other Southern States, but from those in the low-lying wire-grass and seaboard region of Georgia, wherein societies, constituted of English, Highland Scotch, and Salzburgers, owing mainly to geographic and climatic conditions, kept for a century the distinctions that obtained at their establishment.

In a community constituted like that of Middle Georgia whatever was striking in individuality found unobstructed development in social intercourse that was untrammeled except by unwritten laws that excluded only what was indecent and unmanly. There were manifestations of the exuberant freedom of the rustic in that happy region that made him interesting enough to become the hero of a brief story of life and manners. He differed from the rustic of the seaboard as much as any French Switzer differs from the Italian or the German beyond the impassable mountain between them. Illustrative of this difference, General Duncan L. Clinch, of Withlacoochee fame in the Seminole war, used to tell this anecdote. Accompanying the wagon of an up-country merchant going to Savannah for goods was a youth who felt that he might indulge himself for a few weeks with the sight of strange countries. What interested the traveler even more than the shipping were the inlets below the city that with the rising and ebbing tides flowed in contrary directions.

"And you call them things creeks, do you," he asked with disgust, "a-runnin' bofe ways? Well, my laws! the sooner I git back home the better for me and all parties."

His words being repeated to an ancient Salzburger, the latter said:

"He must be vone fool. If de vater run but vone way, it vill soon all run out, un den dey vill be not creek dere."

This seaboard man and his likes were to continue through a generation or two to be as they

DRAWN BY E. W. KEMBLE. ENGRAVED BY P. AITKEN.

A GEORGIA GENTLEMAN OF THE OLD SCHOOL.

were, while the hill-country greenhorn, through contact with benign influences, must make the development possible to his powers.

The Middle Georgian, always a politician, a free, often clamorous, sometimes a fighting

THE LAWYER.

voter, seldom aspired to the legislature or other positions wherein, besides being ridiculous, he might have proved a nuisance. His social rivalries began in country, commonly called "old-field," schools. Children of all conditions attended them during their formative years until a few left for college, and the rest for the plow and the hoe, or for the working-tools of the artisan. Here began intimacies and affections that no subsequent differences in culture or fortune were destined to change. Indeed the first settlers in Middle Georgia, although among them were some as well-born as any who ever came from the old States, or remained therein, organized society on a scale of simplest democracy. In general, every neighbor used to sit at every other neighbor's board, neither feeling that he was imparting or receiving favors other than such as flow from the needs and enjoyments of social existence, proud of nothing so much as living in a region specially blessed by Heaven. Alexander H. Stephens used to recite a speech made at a dinner in Washington whereat were gentlemen from several States, among them a Georgian not accustomed to such occasions. He had already become embarrassed by listening to the toasts in compliment of the other States, and the graceful responses made by a citizen of each, and when Georgia was announced, vexed that nobody was there more competent to do justice to the theme, he rose with a feeling much like anger, and shouted:

"Gentlemen, dod-fetch it all! I can't make a speech; but that ain't goin' to hender me from drinkin' to the State o' Georgie. I 'll do it, and I 'll do it free. Here 's to her! She come from nobody, she ain't beholden on nobody, and you better believe she don't care a continental cent *for* nobody!"

It was a speech characteristic of the life that was led in that happy region fifty and sixty years ago, when the names and images of ancestors were counted of little importance compared with other things needed for the make-up of sound pioneer communities. A people so composed must put forth many an interesting specimen of individuality, with best opportunities for development. Hardy and industrious, yet they learned early the worth of leisure, and various were the devices for its entertainment. The books would be legion that should record the multifarious doings in old-field schools and other theaters wherein blossomed individualisms the fruit of which was a humor racy and abundant: as on the bench of a justice of the peace, on the witness-stand in the superior court, at the head of a battalion on the muster-field, where officers and men knew almost nothing, not only of the order and discipline, but of the words of military parade; above all, in the courtships of young men and maidens, bachelors and widows, with widowers to come in everywhere. Unrestrained intercourse among those of all conditions, the evenness with which life in general ran,—men of culture not only living but talking like their rude neighbors,—tended to inspire the more ignorant with ambition, always more pronounced in those least gifted to imitate the manners of refinement. In this connection it seems fit to remark that positions of petty prominence were sought in general by those whose behavior in the discharge of official functions was the more ludicrous according as they magnified their importance, and essayed to preside with corresponding gravity. As for courtships, they were as swift as fond. The Middle Georgia boy was a lover at ten, or thereabout, an announced suitor at sixteen, often a bridegroom at eighteen. In general he was not acquainted with the Muses, nor had he the winning phrase

of knight or troubadour; yet, feeling more intensely, because vaguely, the need to lay aside for the nonce his rude speech, he would pour forth, sometimes with tongue, sometimes on foolscap, volleys of fiery polysyllables, at whose audacious novelty his sweetheart might laugh till tears came to her eyes. Still she would listen, and she would read, and she would endure to be entreated; for if she knew not for herself, wiser people than she would easily recognize that in spite of such wild efforts to surmount Parnassus, the possession of her would develop a manhood as sound as ever drew woman to lay her head upon a manly breast.

DRAWN BY E. W. KEMBLE. "A BRIDEGROOM AT EIGHTEEN."

It was a saying of Aristotle that those who are to be leaders in societies should think like wise men, but speak as the common people. It is probable that in few if any communities has this maxim been pursued more closely than in Middle Georgia. In a society variously composite,—energetic pioneers coalescing for the purposes of this new life,—the speech of the common people, greatly in excess of numbers, must be the speech of all. Into this had been injected provincialisms according to the various regions from which the people had come. It may seem amiss to praise a vernacular so often regardless of the queen's English; yet it is certainly true that many of its peculiarities, arbitrary words, curt abbreviations, maxims and saws, substitution of the plural for the singular in nouns, assigning gender—especially the feminine—to things inanimate, various modulations of tones and accentuations, made it not only pleasing to the ear, but very expressive. Not only in early, but in late periods, the ablest and most cultured men in the State, especially lawyers, employed it habitually in intercourse, not only with their clients, but with one another, just as in Scotland a century ago, when the most eminent judges and barristers in seasons of leisure were found to lapse into the *patois* of the people.

The tendencies of such social conditions, as they concern the question now being considered, were toward a thorough acquaintance among men of culture, particularly in the legal profession, with the peculiarities to which they themselves had contributed in giving development. A faithful sketcher of rural life in those times

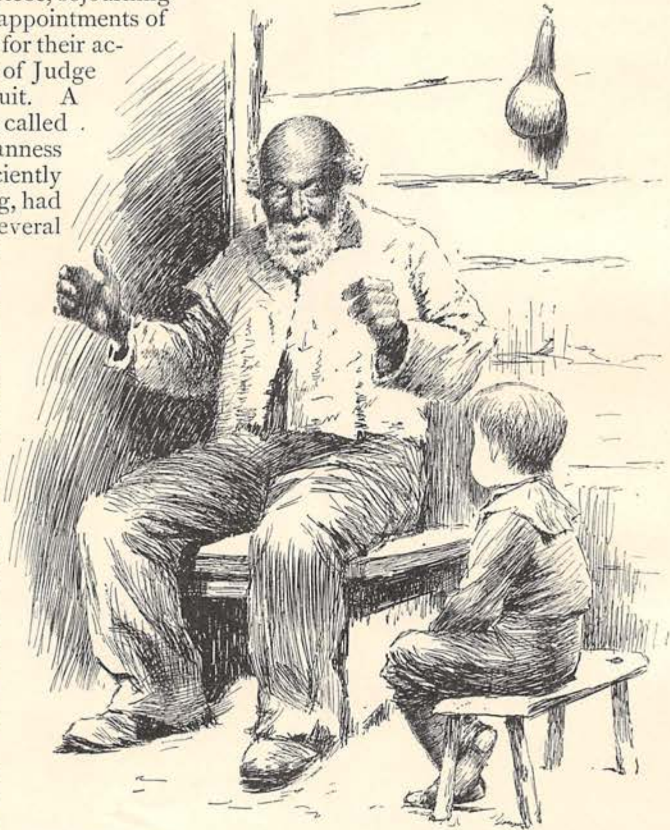
must have known to intimacy and loved and admired this people, and in boyhood must have been as green as the greenest in order to be put into sympathy indispensable to the just performance of his task. Such were the raconteurs among the reunions of the bar at village taverns during the terms of courts. Young lawyers of to-day, even in Middle Georgia, know nothing, except by tradition, of the frolics of their predecessors, who used to follow in sulkies the judges of the Northern and Ocmulgee circuits, with their ten or twelve counties apiece, sojourning at taverns the capacities and appointments of which were wholly inadequate for their accommodation. A story is told of Judge Dooly of the Northern Circuit. A certain pig, of the species there called Landpike, whose generic leanness had not been overcome sufficiently to make him specially tempting, had been roasted whole, and for several days he lay untouched in his dish on the dinner-table. A severe judge was this habitually, yet he could be merciful on occasion. A day or two before adjournment, while at dinner, he was observed to look compassionately for some time at the deceased, and then, turning to the sheriff, who was sitting near, said softly:

"Mr. Sheriff, that pig has been faithful in his attendance upon the court ever since the beginning of the term, and has deported himself with such modesty and general propriety that this Court feels constrained to order his discharge upon his own recognizance."

The lawyers, accepting the situation cheerily, spent the long evenings in story-tellings about their neighbors, friends, one another, and even themselves, to be followed by shouts that when on the long piazza, and even sometimes when in the tavern hall, would be heard throughout the village, driving pious elderly ladies to wonder aghast, and perhaps to declare: "It do seem like them lawyers, big and little, little and big, keers for nothin' nor nobody. A body can't scarcely say their pra'ers, and git to sleep before midnight, when them ongodly people is here." Yet afterward, when told by their husbands or sons some of the jokes, they would laugh as heartily themselves.

The States of Alabama and Mississippi, with many large portions of Texas, are daughters of Middle Georgia, wherein was born (they or their parents) a majority of those who are now leaders in public and private. These love the traditions, and fondly quote the sayings, of their rural forefathers, among whom were so many practical jokes, merry jestings, and the absurd drolleries that spring forth out of the exuberance of life in body, soul, and spirit.

What has been said about white people may be applied within degree to negro slaves. Their dwellings, almost without exception, were within call of their owners', and this contiguity gave facilities for as great improvement as was possible to their condition. The young children of both races worked, played, wrestled, hunted, and fished together, and numberless were the affectionate relationships that, beginning in childhood, continued not only until emancipation, but beyond it. The slave of the average Middle Georgian regarded his master as the greatest and best of mankind, and loved him with a love that neither time nor war with its impoverishments and prostrations could subdue. Such relationships could not have existed in regions wherein masters and slaves dwelt apart. In this the influences exerted were benign to the bond and to the free.



DRAWN BY E. W. KEMBLE.

THE STORY-TELLER.

To the latter they served to impart the ennobling that always attends manful regard for the being of the dependent, and they tempered the rudeness of the former in many ways, among them in leading to efforts, humble as they were, often most laughable, to imitate the graces of manner and speech of those upon whom they depended. No man who knows negroes well will believe that, with opportunities of reasonable fairness, in simple affectionateness, in readiness to make sacrifices, yes, in gratitude for just, humane treatment, they are below the standard of other races. It was owing to the relationships above mentioned that the State of Georgia, particularly its middle region, began so soon to recover from the desolation wrought by the late war between the States. The freedman there, after the first intoxication into which his simple being had been cast by the new feeling of his freedom, was quick — and but for unwise influences, particularly among native white people, would have been quicker — to recover his ancient poise, because he could not be driven to believe, like his kindred on the seaboard and in the river-bottoms, that emancipation had brought the millennium, and was destined apace to turn the world in general upside down. Therefore the two races could rejoin the forces that had been rent asunder, and move on harmoniously in their new careers. On many a plantation in Middle Georgia freedmen and their families are dwelling now as they dwelt before the war. The writer at this moment is thinking of a case touching for the memories of the old-time affectionateness it invokes. A gentleman in one of the old counties, once prosperous, now greatly reduced and in weak health, is maintained by one who was formerly his slave, is dressed by him in better clothes than he himself wears, and is treated with the same deference as of yore. To those who inquire the reasons for such action, he answers that his master is a gentleman, and that he shall not live other than as a gentleman ought to live as long as he can help it.

Conditions such as have been related made possible the creation of *Uncle Remus*. They made the negro more intelligent, more individual, and more interesting than most of his race elsewhere. A historian of him as he was must come from this very region, or one like it, and before these latter changing times were over; and if there ever was a rhapsodist to whom a people's love had descended to be fitly told, it was *Uncle Remus*. The negro is a born musician, and in his way a poet. He loves to see visions and to dream dreams, and to tell of them in solemn, mumbling, mysterious tones and words. *Uncle Remus* is a representative of the old-time negro whose master, when a good man, satisfied his ideas of human greatness. Many times that little white child had sat before his cabin door, or by the log fire within, and listened, sometimes amused, oftener with awe, to tales of far-away times when the black man's ancestors, dwelling by the side of the corn-field amidst the humbler animals of the forest, became familiar with their domestic life and learned their various language. In the creation of this character not only genius and art were requisite, but oft-recurring opportunities to make acquaintance with the interior of this lowly life, goodness to sympathize with it, judgment to admire it, religiousness to reverence it. It was on the plantation of a good man in Putnam County, undulating among the lesser streams leading to the Oconee, that this country-born child learned what has so delighted the English-speaking world. Only there, or on some similar plantation, could the materials have been gathered in such profusion. Only an artist thoughtful and skilful, fond and native-born, could have rehearsed these in sequence so befitting. Only a gentle mind could have imparted the pathos, their chief excellency. *Uncle Remus* shows here and there that, like the aged minstrel in Newark Castle, he feels that he is among the last of his tribe to tell of the old order which he honors so well. Recollections in the midst of great political and social changes have fallen sadly upon his heart. Continuing at his work with an anxiety about results that formerly he did not have, realizing the uselessness of much faultfinding with some things that please him not, unable to put himself in full sympathy with all doings in the Church, yet he feels in his old age the need of being as religious as he can afford to be, considering the times. At night, when the child of those he loves best visits him as he sits and muses, tender fondness comes over his being, and he tells him the weird things the ancientness and significance of which the world knows not. None were more surprised than the author at the favor accorded by the public to his work. Although it was to him an actual embodiment culled out of his childhood among the red hills of Putnam, Joel Chandler Harris did not foresee how the learned and thoughtful everywhere would delight and marvel at the vividness of the reproduction.

Among the old-time negroes in the region that we have been considering was much of a humor very interesting. Their speech, by constant contact with the white man's, which it sought to imitate, had a curtness and vivacity never heard on large seaboard and river plantations. In the lightness of the negro's heart, with an imagination that never sought to be curbed, his words and his deportment often had a fun as racy as any lover of that article reasonably could wish to see. Even his complain-

ings, oftener than otherwise, were put forth with a resentment so peculiar as to provoke as well laughter as sympathy. Witness the following anecdote of the return to his old master, not very long ago, of one of his former slaves after having served another person for a year.

"Why, Jim, how happens it that you quit Perkins?" asked the gentleman.

"Well now, Marse Jack, I gwine up en tell you jes how 't is. I wuck fer dah man all las' year, en I wuck hard, en I make him a good crop. Well, now, de troof is, I did git f'om him a few, but, min' you, jes only a few, merlasses en tobarker, en one hat, en a pa'r o' shoes, en one little thing en 'nother. Well, den, Chris'mus come, en he say, 'Jim, I gwine make out our 'count.' En den he tuck he piece o' paper, en he pen, en he ink-vial, en he 'gin a-settin' down, en when he thoo wid dat job, he 'gin a-addin' up, en a-put'n' down, en a-kyar'n'; en he kyar'd, en he kep' on a-kyar'n', ontwel, bless your soul en body! Marse Jacky, when he got thoo, he done kyar's off all what was a-comin' to me! En so I makes up my min', I does, to leff dar, en pewoose myself back to you, whar I knows dey not gwine be no sich kyar'n' as dem." Then he joined heartily in the laugh raised by what had just occurred to him as being a good practical joke.

DRAWN BY E. W. KEMBLE. THE FIDDLER. ENGRAVED BY J. H. E. WHITNEY.

The country lawyer who, fifty years ago, traveled the judicial circuits aforementioned, met many a character as interesting as original. Not only were such specimens different, even in some matters of dialect, in various circuits, but militia districts in each had their *sui generis* representatives. Some of these, if they had been well known to him, must have suspended for a while the everflowing tears of the weeping philosopher.

When the lawyer traveled in a southerly or a southwesterly direction into the wire-grass region bordered by the Canoochee and the Ohoopee, he found other originals that have been sketched only rarely and briefly — interesting indeed, but neither so variant nor so racy, because, as is herein asserted with confidence, society there, besides consisting of a different people, was organized upon bases quite unlike that of the hill-country, and the few men of culture owning possessions there, who by a free intercourse might have developed, understood, and afterward described individualisms, lived in comparative seclusion, or had their residences in the large towns on the Savannah.

Sometimes public men from Georgia have been wondered at, perhaps sharply criticized, for their carelessness of speech otherwheres than when seriously discussing before national tribunals subjects of national import. We have seen the causes of such apparent ignorance or obliviousness. If may be termed condescension the familiarity with which the greatest men of the State associated with their inferiors in natural gifts, hereditary names, and educational advantages, to such degree of intimacy as to grow to love not only them, but their dialect and some of their manners, it was not felt so to be on the part either of one class or of the other. Did such condescension serve to let down one set from the standard which polite society likes to keep ever erect and exalted? Society leaders a generation ago did not thus complain of the elder Colquitt, Longstreet, Dawson, Jenkins, Cobb, Toombs, Stephens, and others of their time. The relaxations indulged at the Sunday dinners given by Mr. Stephens in his rooms at the National Hotel, Washington, were enjoyed not less by others, however eminent, than by the Georgians, some of whom were always sure to be there. Yet, during the meal, and afterward with cigars and a moderate circulation of the bottle, not only the dramatic but the narrative parts of anecdotes of Georgia production would be recited in the dear old dialect of which, even in his extreme age, none were more fond than the host.

R. M. Johnston.