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Dr. Sevier

George Washington Cable

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DR. SEVIER

BY

GEORGE W. CABLE

author of "old creole days," "the granddissimes," "madame delphine," etc.

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1897

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TROW'S
PRINTING AND BOOKBINDING COMPANY,
NEW YORK.
TO MY FRIEND

MARION A. BAKER

[Pg 1]

DR. SEVIER.

CHAPTER I.

THE DOCTOR.

The main road to wealth in New Orleans has long been Carondelet street. There you see the most alert faces; noses—it seems to one—with more and sharper edge, and eyes smaller and brighter and with less distance between them than one notices in other streets. It is there that the stock and bond brokers hurry to and fro and run together promiscuously—the cunning and the simple, the headlong and the wary—at the four clanging strokes of the Stock Exchange gong. There rises the tall façade of the Cotton Exchange. Looking in from the sidewalk as you pass, you see its main hall, thronged but decorous, the quiet engine-room of the surrounding city's most far-reaching occupation, and at the hall's farther end you descry the "Future Room," and hear the unearthly ramping and bellowing of the bulls and bears. Up and down the street, on either hand, are the ship-brokers and insurers, and in the upper stories foreign consuls among a multitude of lawyers and notaries.

In 1856 this street was just assuming its present [Pg 6] character. The cotton merchants were making it their favorite place of commercial domicile. The open thoroughfare served in lieu of the present exchanges; men made fortunes standing on the curb-stone, and during bank hours the sidewalks were perpetually crowded with cotton factors, buyers, brokers, weighers, reweighers, classers, pickers, pressers, and samplers, and the air was laden with cotton quotations and prognostications.

Number 3½, second floor, front, was the office of Dr. Sevier. This office was convenient to everything. Immediately under its windows lay the sidewalks where congregated the men who, of all in New Orleans, could best afford to pay for being sick, and least desired to die. Canal street, the city's leading artery, was just below, at the near left-hand corner. Beyond it lay the older town, not yet impoverished in those days,—the French quarter. A single square and a half off at the right, and in plain view from the front windows, shone the dazzling white walls of the St. Charles Hotel, where the

nabobs of the river plantations came and dwelt with their fair-handed wives in seasons of peculiar anticipation, when it is well to be near the highest medical skill. In the opposite direction a three minutes' quick drive around the upper corner and down Common street carried the Doctor to his ward in the great Charity Hospital, and to the school of medicine, where he filled the chair set apart to the holy ailments of maternity. Thus, as it were, he laid his left hand on the rich and his right on the poor; and he was not left-handed.

Not that his usual attitude was one of benediction. He stood straight up in his austere pure-mindedness, tall, slender, pale, sharp of voice, keen of glance, stern in judgment, aggressive in debate, and fixedly untender everywhere, except—but always except—in the sick [Pg 7] chamber. His inner heart was all of flesh; but his demands for the rectitude of mankind pointed out like the muzzles of cannon through the embrasures of his virtues. To demolish evil!—that seemed the finest of aims; and even as a physician, that was, most likely, his motive until later years and a better self-knowledge had taught him that to do good was still finer and better. He waged war—against malady. To fight; to stifle; to cut down; to uproot; to overwhelm;—these were his springs of action. That their results were good proved that his sentiment of benevolence was strong and high; but it was well-nigh shut out of sight by that impatience of evil which is very fine and knightly in youngest manhood, but which we like to see give way to kindlier moods as the earlier heat of the blood begins to pass.

He changed in later years; this was in 1856. To “resist not evil” seemed to him then only a rather feeble sort of knavery. To face it in its nakedness, and to inveigh against it in high places and low, seemed the consummation of all manliness; and manliness was the key-note of his creed. There was no other necessity in this life.

“But a man must live,” said one of his kindred, to whom, truth to tell, he had refused assistance.

“No, sir; that is just what he can't do. A man must die! So, while he lives, let him be a man!”

How inharmonious a setting, then, for Dr. Sevier, was 3½ Carondelet street! As he drove, each morning, down to that point, he had to pass through long, irregular files of fellow-beings thronging ei-

ther sidewalk,—a sadly unchivalric grouping of men whose daily and yearly life was subordinated only and entirely to the getting of wealth, and whose every eager motion was a repetition of the sinister old maxim that “Time is money.”

[Pg 8] “It’s a great deal more, sir; it’s life!” the Doctor always retorted.

Among these groups, moreover, were many who were all too well famed for illegitimate fortune. Many occupations connected with the handling of cotton yielded big harvests in perquisites. At every jog of the Doctor’s horse, men came to view whose riches were the outcome of semi-respectable larceny. It was a day of reckless operation; much of the commerce that came to New Orleans was simply, as one might say, beached in Carondelet street. The sight used to keep the long, thin, keen-eyed doctor in perpetual indignation.

“Look at the wreckers!” he would say.

It was breakfast at eight, indignation at nine, dyspepsia at ten.

So his setting was not merely inharmonious; it was damaging. He grew sore on the whole matter of money-getting.

“Yes, I have money. But I don’t go after it. It comes to me, because I seek and render service for the service’s sake. It will come to anybody else the same way; and why should it come any other way?”

He not only had a low regard for the motives of most seekers of wealth; he went further, and fell into much disbelief of poor men’s needs. For instance, he looked upon a man’s inability to find employment, or upon a poor fellow’s run of bad luck, as upon the placarded woes of a hurdy-gurdy beggar.

“If he wants work he will find it. As for begging, it ought to be easier for any true man to starve than to beg.”

The sentiment was ungentle, but it came from the bottom of his belief concerning himself, and a longing for moral greatness in all men.

[Pg 9] “However,” he would add, thrusting his hand into his pocket and bringing out his purse, “I’ll help any man to make him-

self useful. And the sick—well, the sick, as a matter of course. Only I must know what I'm doing."

Have some of us known Want? To have known her—though to love her was impossible—is "a liberal education." The Doctor was learned; but this acquaintanceship, this education, he had never got. Hence his untenderness. Shall we condemn the fault? Yes. And the man? We have not the face. To be *just*, which he never knowingly failed to be, and at the same time to feel tenderly for the unworthy, to deal kindly with the erring,—it is a double grace that hangs not always in easy reach even of the tallest. The Doctor attained to it—but in later years; meantime, this story—which, I believe, had he ever been poor would never have been written.

[Pg 10]

CHAPTER II.

A YOUNG STRANGER.

In 1856 New Orleans was in the midst of the darkest ten years of her history. Yet she was full of new-comers from all parts of the commercial world,—strangers seeking livelihood. The ravages of cholera and yellow-fever, far from keeping them away, seemed actually to draw them. In the three years 1853, '54, and '55, the cemeteries had received over thirty-five thousand dead; yet here, in 1856, besides shiploads of European immigrants, came hundreds of unacclimated youths, from all parts of the United States, to fill the wide gaps which they imagined had been made in the ranks of the great exporting city's clerking force.

Upon these pilgrims Dr. Sevier cast an eye full of interest, and often of compassion hidden under outward impatience. "Who wants to see," he would demand, "men—*and women*—increasing the risks of this uncertain life?" But he was also full of respect for them. There was a certain nobility rightly attributable to emigration itself in the abstract. It was the cutting loose from friends and aid,—those sweet-named temptations,—and the going forth into self-appointed exile and into dangers known and unknown, trusting to the help of one's own right hand to exchange honest toil for honest bread and raiment. His eyes kindled to see the goodly, broad, red-cheeked fellows. Sometimes, though, he saw women, and sometimes tender

women, by their side; and that [Pg 11] sight touched the pathetic chord of his heart with a rude twangle that vexed him.

It was on a certain bright, cool morning early in October that, as he drove down Carondelet street toward his office, and one of those little white omnibuses of the old Apollo-street line, crowding in before his carriage, had compelled his driver to draw close in by the curb-stone and slacken speed to a walk, his attention chanced to fall upon a young man of attractive appearance, glancing stranger-wise and eagerly at signs and entrances while he moved down the street. Twice, in the moment of the Doctor's enforced delay, he noticed the young stranger make inquiry of the street's more accustomed frequenters, and that in each case he was directed farther on. But, the way opened, the Doctor's horse switched his tail and was off, the stranger was left behind, and the next moment the Doctor stepped across the sidewalk and went up the stairs of Number 3½ to his office. Something told him—we are apt to fall into thought on a stair-way—that the stranger was looking for a physician.

He had barely disposed of the three or four waiting messengers that arose from their chairs against the corridor wall, and was still reading the anxious lines left in various handwritings on his slate, when the young man entered. He was of fair height, slenderly built, with soft auburn hair, a little untrimmed, neat dress, and a diffident, yet expectant and courageous, face.

"Dr. Sevier?"

"Yes, sir."

"Doctor, my wife is very ill; can I get you to come at once and see her?"

"Who is her physician?"

"I have not called any; but we must have one now."

"I don't know about going at once. This is my hour [Pg 12] for being in the office. How far is it, and what's the trouble?"

"We are only three squares away, just here in Custom-house street." The speaker began to add a faltering enumeration of some very grave symptoms. The Doctor noticed that he was slightly deaf; he uttered his words as though he did not hear them.

"Yes," interrupted Dr. Sevier, speaking half to himself as he turned around to a standing case of cruel-looking silver-plated things on shelves; "that's a small part of the penalty women pay for the doubtful honor of being our mothers. I'll go. What is your number? But you had better drive back with me if you can." He drew back from the glass case, shut the door, and took his hat.

"Narcisse!"

On the side of the office nearest the corridor a door let into a hall-room that afforded merely good space for the furniture needed by a single accountant. The Doctor had other interests besides those of his profession, and, taking them altogether, found it necessary, or at least convenient, to employ continuously the services of a person to keep his accounts and collect his bills. Through the open door the book-keeper could be seen sitting on a high stool at a still higher desk, — a young man of handsome profile and well-knit form. At the call of his name he unwound his legs from the rounds of the stool and leaped into the Doctor's presence with a superlatively high-bred bow.

"I shall be back in fifteen minutes," said the Doctor. "Come, Mr. — —," and went out with the stranger.

Narcisse had intended to speak. He stood a moment, then lifted the last half inch of a cigarette to his lips, took a long, meditative inhalation, turned half round on [Pg 13] his heel, dashed the remnant with fierce emphasis into a spittoon, ejected two long streams of smoke from his nostrils, and extending his fist toward the door by which the Doctor had gone out, said: —

"All right, ole hoss!" No, not that way. It is hard to give his pronunciation by letter. In the word "right" he substituted an a for the r, sounding it almost in the same instant with the i, yet distinct from it: "All a-ight, ole hoss!"

Then he walked slowly back to his desk, with that feeling of relief which some men find in the renewal of a promissory note, twined his legs again among those of the stool, and, adding not a word, resumed his pen.

The Doctor's carriage was hurrying across Canal street.

"Dr. Sevier," said the physician's companion, "I don't know what your charges are" —

"The highest," said the Doctor, whose dyspepsia was gnawing him just then with fine energy. The curt reply struck fire upon the young man.

"I don't propose to drive a bargain, Dr. Sevier!" He flushed angrily after he had spoken, breathed with compressed lips, and winked savagely, with the sort of indignation that school-boys show to a harsh master.

The physician answered with better self-control.

"What do you propose?"

"I was going to propose — being a stranger to you, sir — to pay in advance." The announcement was made with a tremulous, but triumphant, *hauteur*, as though it must cover the physician with mortification. The speaker stretched out a rather long leg, and, drawing a pocket-book, produced a twenty-dollar piece.

The Doctor looked full in his face with impatient surprise, then turned his eyes away again as if he restrained himself, and said, in a subdued tone: —

[Pg 14] "I would rather you had haggled about the price."

"I don't hear" — said the other, turning his ear.

The Doctor waved his hand: —

"Put that up, if you please."

The young stranger was disconcerted. He remained silent for a moment, wearing a look of impatient embarrassment. He still extended the piece, turning it over and over with his thumb-nail as it lay on his fingers.

"You don't know me, Doctor," he said. He got another cruel answer.

"We're getting acquainted," replied the physician.

The victim of the sarcasm bit his lip, and protested, by an unconscious, sidewise jerk of the chin: —

"I wish you'd" — and he turned the coin again.

The physician dropped an eagle's stare on the gold.

"I don't practise medicine on those principles."

"But, Doctor," insisted the other, appeasingly, "you can make an exception if you will. Reasons are better than rules, my old professor used to say. I am here without friends, or letters, or credentials of any sort; this is the only recommendation I can offer."

"Don't recommend you at all; anybody can do that."

The stranger breathed a sigh of overtasked patience, smiled with a baffled air, seemed once or twice about to speak, but doubtful what to say, and let his hand sink.

"Well, Doctor," — he rested his elbow on his knee, gave the piece one more turn over, and tried to draw the physician's eye by a look of boyish pleasantness, — "I'll not ask you to take pay in advance, but I will ask you to take care of this money for me. Suppose I should lose it, or have it stolen from me, or — Doctor, it would be a real comfort to me if you would."

"I can't help that. I shall treat your wife, and then send in my bill." The Doctor folded arms and appeared [Pg 15] to give attention to his driver. But at the same time he asked: —

"Not subject to epilepsy, eh?"

"No, sir!" The indignant shortness of the retort drew no sign of attention from the Doctor; he was silently asking himself what this nonsense meant. Was it drink, or gambling, or a confidence game? Or was it only vanity, or a mistake of inexperience? He turned his head unexpectedly, and gave the stranger's facial lines a quick, thorough examination. It startled them from a look of troubled meditation. The physician as quickly turned away again.

"Doctor," began the other, but added no more.

The physician was silent. He turned the matter over once more in his mind. The proposal was absurdly unbusiness-like. That his part in it might look ungenerous was nothing; so his actions were right, he rather liked them to bear a hideous aspect: that was his war-paint. There was that in the stranger's attitude that agreed fairly with his own theories of living. A fear of debt, for instance, if that

was genuine it was good; and, beyond and better than that, a fear of money. He began to be more favorably impressed.

"Give it to me," he said, frowning; "mark you, this is your way," — he dropped the gold into his vest-pocket, — "it isn't mine."

The young man laughed with visible relief, and rubbed his knee with his somewhat too delicate hand. The Doctor examined him again with a milder glance.

"I suppose you think you've got the principles of life all right, don't you?"

"Yes, I do," replied the other, taking his turn at folding arms.

[Pg 16] "H-m-m! I dare say you do. What you lack is the practice." The Doctor sealed his utterance with a nod.

The young man showed amusement; more, it may be, than he felt, and presently pointed out his lodging-place.

"Here, on this side; Number 40;" and they alighted.

[Pg 17]

CHAPTER III.

HIS WIFE.

In former times the presence in New Orleans, during the cooler half of the year, of large numbers of mercantile men from all parts of the world, who did not accept the fever-plagued city as their permanent residence, made much business for the renters of furnished apartments. At the same time there was a class of persons whose residence was permanent, and to whom this letting of rooms fell by an easy and natural gravitation; and the most respectable and comfortable rented rooms of which the city could boast were those *chambres garnies* in Custom-house and Bienville streets, kept by worthy free or freed mulatto or quadroon women.

In 1856 the gala days of this half-caste people were quite over. Difference was made between virtue and vice, and the famous quadroon balls were shunned by those who aspired to respectability, whether their whiteness was nature or only toilet powder. Generations of domestic service under ladies of Gallic blood had

brought many of them to a supreme pitch of excellence as house-keepers. In many cases money had been inherited; in other cases it had been saved up. That Latin feminine ability to hold an awkward position with impregnable serenity, and, like the yellow Mississippi, to give back no reflection from the overhanging sky, emphasized this superior fitness. That bright, womanly business ability that comes of the same blood added again to their excellence. Not to be [Pg 18] home itself, nothing could be more like it than were the apartments let by Madame Cécile, or Madame Sophie, or Madame Athalie, or Madame Polyxène, or whatever the name might be.

It was in one of these houses, that presented its dull brick front directly upon the sidewalk of Custom-house street, with the unfailing little square sign of *Chambres à louer* (Rooms to let), dangling by a string from the overhanging balcony and twirling in the breeze, that the sick wife lay. A waiting slave-girl opened the door as the two men approached it, and both of them went directly upstairs and into a large, airy room. On a high, finely carved, and heavily hung mahogany bed, to which the remaining furniture corresponded in ancient style and massiveness, was stretched the form of a pale, sweet-faced little woman.

The proprietress of the house was sitting beside the bed,—a quadron of good, kind face, forty-five years old or so, tall and broad. She rose and responded to the Doctor's silent bow with that pretty dignity of greeting which goes with all French blood, and remained standing. The invalid stirred.

The physician came forward to the bedside. The patient could not have been much over nineteen years of age. Her face was very pleasing; a trifle slender in outline; the brows somewhat square, not wide; the mouth small. She would not have been called beautiful, even in health, by those who lay stress on correctness of outlines. But she had one thing that to some is better. Whether it was in the dark blue eyes that were lifted to the Doctor's with a look which changed rapidly from inquiry to confidence, or in the fine, scarcely perceptible strands of pale-brown hair that played about her temples, he did not make out; but, for one cause [Pg 19] or another, her face was of that kind which almost any one has seen once or twice,

and no one has seen often, — that seems to give out a soft, but veritable, light.

She was very weak. Her eyes quickly dropped away from his, and turned wearily, but peacefully, to those of her husband.

The Doctor spoke to her. His greeting and gentle inquiry were full of a soothing quality that was new to the young man. His long fingers moved twice or thrice softly across her brow, pushing back the thin, waving strands, and then he sat down in a chair, continuing his kind, direct questions. The answers were all bad.

He turned his glance to the quadroon; she understood it; the patient was seriously ill. The nurse responded with a quiet look of comprehension. At the same time the Doctor disguised from the young strangers this interchange of meanings by an audible question to the quadroon.

“Have I ever met you before?”

“No, seh.”

“What is your name?”

“Zénobie.”

“Madame Zénobie,” softly whispered the invalid, turning her eyes, with a glimmer of feeble pleasantry, first to the quadroon and then to her husband.

The physician smiled at her an instant, and then gave a few concise directions to the quadroon. “Get me” — thus and so.

The woman went and came. She was a superior nurse, like so many of her race. So obvious, indeed, was this, that when she gently pressed the young husband an inch or two aside, and murmured that “de doctah” wanted him to “go h-out,” he left the room, although he knew the physician had not so indicated.

[Pg 20] By-and-by he returned, but only at her beckon, and remained at the bedside while Madame Zénobie led the Doctor into another room to write his prescription.

“Who are these people?” asked the physician, in an undertone, looking up at the quadroon, and pausing with the prescription half torn off.

She shrugged her large shoulders and smiled perplexedly.

"Mizzez – Reechin?" The tone was one of query rather than assertion. "Dey sesso," she added.

She might nurse the lady like a mother, but she was not going to be responsible for the genuineness of a stranger's name.

"Where are they from?"

"I dunno? – Some pless? – I nevva yeh dat nem biff?"

She made a timid attempt at some word ending in "walk," and smiled, ready to accept possible ridicule.

"Milwaukee?" asked the Doctor.

She lifted her palm, smiled brightly, pushed him gently with the tip of one finger, and nodded. He had hit the nail on the head.

"What business is he in?"

The questioner arose.

She cast a sidelong glance at him with a slight enlargement of her eyes, and, compressing her lips, gave her head a little, decided shake. The young man was not employed.

"And has no money either, I suppose," said the physician, as they started again toward the sick-room.

She shrugged again and smiled; but it came to her mind that the Doctor might be considering his own interests, and she added, in a whisper: –

"Dey pay me."

[Pg 21] She changed places with the husband, and the physician and he passed down the stairs together in silence.

"Well, Doctor?" said the young man, as he stood, prescription in hand, before the carriage-door.

"Well," responded the physician, "you should have called me sooner."

The look of agony that came into the stranger's face caused the Doctor instantly to repent his hard speech.

"You don't mean" —exclaimed the husband.

"No, no; I don't think it's too late. Get that prescription filled and give it to Mrs. — —"

"Richling," said the young man.

"Let her have perfect quiet," continued the Doctor. "I shall be back this evening."

And when he returned she had improved.

She was better again the next day, and the next; but on the fourth she was in a very critical state. She lay quite silent during the Doctor's visit, until he, thinking he read in her eyes a wish to say something to him alone, sent her husband and the quadron out of the room on separate errands at the same moment. And immediately she exclaimed:—

"Doctor, save my life! You mustn't let me die! Save me, for my husband's sake! To lose all he's lost for me, and then to lose me too—save me, Doctor! save me!"

"I'm going to do it!" said he. "You shall get well!"

And what with his skill and her endurance it turned out so.

[Pg 22]

CHAPTER IV.

CONVALESCENCE AND ACQUAINTANCE.

A man's clothing is his defence; but with a woman all dress is adornment. Nature decrees it; adornment is her instinctive delight. And, above all, the adorning of a bride; it brings out so charmingly the meaning of the thing. Therein centres the gay consent of all mankind and womankind to an innocent, sweet apostasy from the ranks of both. The value of living—which is loving; the sacreddest wonders of life; all that is fairest and of best delight in thought, in feeling, yea, in substance,—all are apprehended under the floral crown and hymeneal veil. So, when at length one day Mrs. Richling said, "Madame Zénobie, don't you think I might sit up?" it would have been absurd to doubt the quadron's willingness to assist her in dressing. True, here was neither wreath nor veil, but here was

very young wifehood, and its re-attiring would be like a proclamation of victory over the malady that had striven to put two hearts asunder. Her willingness could hardly be doubted, though she smiled irresponsibly, and said:—

“If you thing” — She spread her eyes and elbows suddenly in the manner of a crab, with palms turned upward and thumbs outstretched — “Well!” — and so dropped them.

“You don’t want wait till de doctah comin’?” she asked.

“I don’t think he’s coming; it’s after his time.”

[Pg 23] “Yass?”

The woman was silent a moment, and then threw up one hand again, with the forefinger lifted alertly forward.

“I make a lill fi’ biffa.”

She made a fire. Then she helped the convalescent to put on a few loose drapings. She made no concealment of the enjoyment it gave her, though her words were few, and generally were answers to questions; and when at length she brought from the wardrobe, pretending not to notice her mistake, a loose and much too ample robe of woollen and silken stuffs to go over all, she moved as though she trod on holy ground, and distinctly felt, herself, the thrill with which the convalescent, her young eyes beaming their assent, let her arms into the big sleeves, and drew about her small form the soft folds of her husband’s morning-gown.

“He goin’ to fine that droll,” said the quadron.

The wife’s face confessed her pleasure.

“It’s as much mine as his,” she said.

“Is you mek dat?” asked the nurse, as she drew its silken cord about the convalescent’s waist.

“Yes. Don’t draw it tight; leave it loose—so; but you can tie the knot tight. That will do; there!” She smiled broadly. “Don’t tie me in as if you were tying me in forever.”

Madame Zénobie understood perfectly, and, smiling in response, did tie it as if she were tying her in forever.