

CHARLES W. FRENCH.

Charles W. French was born on a farm beside what is now known as the southern division of the Lake Shore road, near Wakeman, Huron county, Ohio, September 2, 1862. His progenitors on the side of both father and mother were of Connecticut stock, and it is not known for how many generations they had lived in America.

The eldest son of parents who were indebted for much of the purchase price of their farm, he cheerfully assumed a share of their burden of toil while yet a child. At the age of eleven years he loaded and stacked forty-four acres of grain, his father pitching both ways. He was patient and careful in his work. He was kind to domestic animals and pets, with all of which he was a welcome playfellow. He would sometimes work in summer with as many as three chipmunks playing about him, each one ready to scamper into his pockets if alarmed. A fine, yet spirited, young horse used to carry him on errands to the village at a dead gallop without so much as a rope on. He was deeply attached to his mother, who died just before he was fourteen years old, and to a few other good women with whom he came in contact in childhood. Their influence has survived the shock of nearly a score of eventful years.

Neither liquor, tobacco nor profanity has he ever indulged in. He scorned the so called lighter follies of youth. A reverence for womanhood has always been one of the strongest traits of his character. There has not been anything in his private life from which a good woman would need to shrink or a little child should avoid. This was not so much because he resisted allurements of evil, to which, in fact, he never paid serious attention, as it was that he yielded to a craving for good.

His opportunities for attending school were limited to a rural district and later a village high school. After he was ten years old he did not attend school in summer, and did not average quite sixty days per year in school from the age of ten to that of nineteen, after which he attended no school whatever.

To a misfortune that clouded his early years he is indebted in a large measure for a mental training that widely influenced his later life. As a child he was frail in body and shy in spirit, naturally diffident to a painful degree. He was born a stammerer and so seriously was he thus afflicted that it was often difficult to understand his attempted speech. The usual fellowships of childhood were therefore shunned by him. He was not without compensation. He had access to a good library. Early driven by the wounds to which a sensitive spirit was ever exposed to the society of his own thoughts and the fellowship of his own mind, the history of the world was his playground, its episodes his toys. The senate of Rome, the assemblies of France, the parliaments of England and the congress of the United States had much more to do with forming his character than did either the precepts of his elders or the examples of his fellows. He delved into the lore of ancient Greece, southern Asia and all vanished peoples. He marched with the legions of Rome from the Euphrates to Gibraltar. He cried himself to sleep over the ruin of the Roman empire. He paced the corridors of the great hall, watching the growth of that spirit of personal liberty which is the crowning glory of the Anglo-Saxon. He walked the aisles of the great abbey, musing upon the record of generations that have made our race illustrious forevermore. Thus a shy, nervous boy, dressed in home-made clothes, grew up under the shadow of characters that have ennobled human life in all ages.

As a youth he had almost no social life. His attempts to make the acquaintance of other young people usually resulted painfully to him. An incident of his childhood will illustrate the degree of misunderstanding to which he was subjected when seeking social intercourse. At a revival in a village church a woman who was a zealous worker approached him with the query, "My boy, are you prepared for death?" With grave simplicity this child, who had lived with the centuries, stammered, "Yes, ma'am; I would be will-

ing to die if I thought that I could then talk with William of Orange for a few minutes." The effect produced by this peculiar profession of faith so abashed the boy that he fled from the church.

At the age of sixteen he began attending debating societies in the school districts and villages of Huron county. To his surprise, when addressing an audience the bonds of the stammerer seemed to fall away from him. The faces before him often appeared to fade away and in their place there assembled about him the famous dead of all ages with whom he had been familiar rather than with the living. As a public speaker he attained some degree of success.

At the age of nineteen he began life for himself, commencing with a job of cutting stove-wood in the winter of 1881-2. During most of the summer of 1882 he worked on a farm. In the fall of that year he began blowing stumps with dynamite. He rapidly became skillful in the use of this explosive, of which little was then known. Within a few months his operations extended over much of northeastern Ohio. He introduced the use of dynamite in the stripping of sandstone quarries and the working of limestone quarries in northern Ohio and on the islands of Lake Erie. He engaged in submarine work to some extent. He was always successful in his calculations respecting the use of high explosives. He sometimes fired single charges containing nearly a ton of dynamite!

Lack of practical knowledge of men proved to be fatal to his early business career. At the age of twenty-two he failed for twenty thousand dollars. The assets then in his possession, consisting of property, contracts and plans, would have yielded a fortune had he then been able to control men as well as he handled nitro-glycerine.

The result of this failure was to discredit him almost entirely among ordinary people. The next few years of his life were passed in a ceaseless struggle to regain such a standing as would enable him to reduce to practicable operation the industrial projects with which his mind was usually filled. Repeated failures gave a somber hue to his mind but did not crush his spirit. In the summer of 1881 he succeeded in acquiring considerable property at Sandusky, Ohio. He designed and built a novel barge for taking up reef rock in submarine work. This apparatus cost seven thousand dollars, and every sea captain who examined it declared it to be an utter failure. It was a success, doing all that it had been planned to do. He began the construction of a mill for crushing limestone into rock ballast. This plant was located about four miles south of Sandusky, on the Lake Erie division of the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad, and before this mill was

completed he organized the Sandusky Stone Company, which finished the plant and operated it for several years. It was finally sold to the Lorain Steel Company and is now the property of the United States Steel Trust.

In the spring of 1889 Mr. French and his associates bought a tract of sandstone quarry land near Lucas, Richland county, Ohio, and began the development of the same. Nearly one hundred thousand dollars was expended upon this property. In the winter of 1892-3 nearly all of the men who were associated with Mr. French in this project failed disastrously. The property was involved in a tangled mass of litigation. It was finally sold and now belongs to a corporation controlled by Mr. French.

On June 27, 1890, Mr. French was married to Miss Alberta Walker, of Sandusky, Ohio. Miss Walker's father had been at first a foreman for Mr. French and afterward the superintendent for the Sandusky Stone Company during the summer of 1888. He was killed by an accidental explosion of dynamite in Sandusky, on Thanksgiving day, 1888. At the time of her marriage Miss Walker was the secretary of the Baker Stone Company, of which Mr. French was then the president. Their domestic life has been in the main a very happy one. One child, a son, died at the age of four months. The mother and two younger sisters of Mrs. French find a home with them. They have taken three little girls, whom they are trying to train into Christian womanhood. Mr. French's career is greatly influenced by the peace and affection of his domestic life.

In the summer of 1896 Mr. French began planning the construction of a steam road to be used as a branch of the Big Four, from Shelby to Mansfield, Ohio. This section of road is now graded and ready for track-laying. The project gradually grew until he finally undertook to create practically a new system that should link existing Vanderbilt lines by two trans-Ohio divisions through territory yielding a heavy tonnage. He is now at the head of several railway companies, holding Ohio charters, the Youngstown & Cleveland Railway Company, the Richland & Mahoning Railway Company and the Chicago Short Line Railway Company being the principal ones of this combination of corporations. Including new roads to be built and existing lines to be bought, he is projecting about five hundred and fifty miles of main line road and perhaps two hundred miles of belt lines. He has gathered about him an official staff of capable men, all of whom work harmoniously to a common end. The new system will reach from a point near Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania, to New Washington, Ohio; from Youngstown to Delphos, Ohio; from Carey, Ohio, to Fort Wayne, Indiana; from Youngstown to Cleveland, Ohio; and from New London to

Norwalk, Ohio. This system will link the Pittsburg & Lake Erie Railroad, which is practically the Pittsburg terminal, direct with the Lake Shore at Cleveland, with the Lake Shore at Norwalk, and with the Nickel Plate at Fort Wayne, Indiana. The southern division will pass through Salem, Alliance, Canton, Massillon, Wooster, Mansfield and Shelby. The northern division will pass through Youngstown and Akron.

Mr. French and his staff have succeeded in interesting such support for this project as insures the completion of the system. It may be extended after its lines as now projected are finished.

At the age of thirty-nine it would seem that Mr. French is destined to complete a work that will at least leave a record of his career. In his private life he is eager to add to the sum of human joys before earth shall have passed. In his public career he is ambitious to do a man's work while it is yet day.