

WASHINGTON AS A PRACTICAL JOKER

PROSPERITY sees a stiff, formal picture of Washington standing in the bow of a boat crossing the Delaware amid floating blocks of ice on that memorable Christmas night, to fight the battle which turned the tide of the revolution in the right direction. But no painter could delineate the heroism of the actual scene. His men were ragged—half naked. Besides the running ice in the river, there was a blinding blizzard, and it was so bitter cold that the chief loss on the American side was of the men who, though injured to pioneer hardships, froze to death that awful night.

Did General Washington stand in his boat in that dangerous current during a driving storm and stare pompously at the opposite shore? Not he. Instead of that, he "sat tight" and cajoled the men, using every device that might make them forget their terrible situation; even telling them a facetious story, which, coming from him, started them, set their blood tingling and made them oblivious to the cold and dangers around them. That was the grandest deed in the military strategem which made Frederick the Great of Prussia, and, indeed, the whole world, wonder at the genius of Washington.

Nearly every one knows the outside of the story of the siege of Boston by the new commander-in-chief, who had come to the continental congress as a wealthy Virginia colonel, and his nondescript crowd of raw recruits, wholly unused not only to military discipline, but even to military forms. But few know of the transcendent bluff General Washington had to put up when he discovered that there were but a few rounds of gunpowder in the possession of the whole American army, while the British were amply supplied with ammunition and might sally forth any hour against the American "irregulars."

"Some one had blundered." Many a commander would have shown up the improvident officers who had that matter in charge and peevishly thrown up the command as ridiculously impossible. But General Washington did not tell his most trusted officers of the exasperating dilemma he found himself in. He knew the awful secret would spread if known to a few, and the great cause of justice might be lost. He began quietly to scour the country for gunpowder. He soon found that the nearest place at which any quantity could be had was in a magazine on the island of Bermuda. To get that required a secret expedition, much hazard and many weeks; but Washington's nerve was equal to the fearful strain.

During that long, tense interval the American troops were working away upon the fortifications, preparing for a grand attack. Meanwhile the young commander-in-chief was entertaining hospitably at his headquarters, the Craige mansion, now best known as "Longfellow's Home," in Cambridge. As a pleasant diversion, "Lady" Washington, then one of the wealthiest women in America, came to visit the general, and all the countryside was agog over her coach-and-four with six black postilions in white and scarlet livery. Even the British, cooped up in Boston, were impressed by the resources and apparent confidence of the American generalissimo.

While one expedition was gone to Bermuda for powder, General Knox, with a small force, succeeded in bringing a number of cannon several hundred miles on ox sleds in midwinter from Fort Ticonderoga. In those "times that tried men's souls" it was Washington's iron nerve, supported by his broad sense of humor, sometimes scintillating with a radiance worthy of a Franklin or a Lincoln, which saved the day. This was only one of many occasions on which Washington had to fight out the revolution alone. A friend of Lincoln's once said of him, "The president's laugh is his life-preserver." This was truer of Washington than any one seems to have realized in a day when strict gravity without levity, was expected of public characters. To laugh or to see the humorous side of an incident was considered the sign of a frivolous disposition.

Washington's early biographers were solemn men. To have told in their books how much their hero laughed would have been, in their opinion, wantonly exposing his weakness to public gaze. Men like "Parson" Weems, renegade preacher and tramp siddler though he was, had been brought up to think that laughing was "worse than wicked—it was vulgar!" In straining to make their hero appear to have been a demigod, those pedantic biographers related not what George Washington really did, but what they imagined such a boy or man ought to have done under given conditions.

Washington would have laughed heartily at Weems' hatchet-and-cherry-tree story if he had ever heard it—which he never did, for it was not invented till a later edition of the erring rector's juvenile history, six years after Washington's death. Yet the real hero of the cherry-tree fiction would have found it the occasion of gravity as well as mirth. In the stilted story of "Little George and His Pa," Weems was only carrying out the idea of his time; to tell not what the small boy actually did, but what the consummate little prig he conceived little George Washington to have been would have done if he had cut down his father's favorite cherry tree.

If little George Washington had been the insufferable little prig described by Mr. Weems, his half-brothers would not have loved him better than their own brothers, or their own children, for that matter. His early life was fuller of exciting experiences than any fiction. Yet the life of young Washington is yet to be told as an adventure story. Even in his quaint little diaries he early discloses a lively sense of humor—savagely humorous sometimes, but broad and boyish. He showed this by telling only the jokes against himself. When he was a lad of sixteen he led a surveying party to lay out the lands of his old friend, Lord Fairfax, in the wilderness of the Shenandoah. Here is one of his own experiences as a "tenderfoot," recorded on Tuesday, March 15, 1747-8:

"We got our Suppers & was lighted into a Room, and I, not being so good a Woodsman as ye rest of my company, stripped myself very orderly, & went into ye Bed, as they called it, when to my surprise I found it to be nothing but a little straw—matted together without sheets or anything else but one threadbare blanket, with double its weight of Vermin, such as Lice, Fleas, &c."

"I was glad to get up (as soon as ye light was carried from us) I put on my Clothes and lay as

my Companions. Had we not been very tired, I am sure we should not have slept much that night."

The next night he related that they "had a good dinner & a good Feather Bed, which was a very agreeable regale."

In describing an Indian war dance, he went on, "Some liquor elevating their Spirits put them in ye Humor of Dauncing. Ye best Dauncer jumped about ye ring in a most comick Manner!"

Others of that wilderness gang told a story of the boy surveyor which he was too modest to relate about himself—how young George turned the tables on Big Bear, the wily chief, who was in the habit of holding out his sinewy hand with seeming friendly intent and saying, in Indian fashion, "How?" Woe to the unsuspecting white man whose hand Big Bear seized in his terrible grasp, while he laughed in savage glee at the pale-face's anguished contortions.

Young Washington had been warned in time. He had a huge, strong hand of his own and knew a trick or two that he thought he would like to try on that Indian's wily claw if he could just get the right hold. His chance came soon enough for Big Bear, who presented a seemingly amicable paw with an innocent "How?"

The young surveyor seized the Indian's hand with such friendly enthusiasm that Big Bear did an agonizing little dance "in a very comick manner," while the spectators, both white and red, stood by and shouted with glee to see the cruel savage caught in his own trap. Never again did Big Bear show such solicitude for the health of George Washington.

At the age of twenty George was the chosen envoy to carry a "notice to quit" from the governor of Virginia to the French commander encamped in the Ohio region. He wrote in his journal of that expedition concerning the supper given him by the French and Indians at the fort at Venango:

"The wine, as they dosed themselves pretty plentifully with it, soon banished the restraint which at first appeared in the conversation, and gave a license to their tongues to reveal their sentiments more freely. They told me that it was their absolute design to take possession of the Ohio—and by G— they would do it!"

At the French fort, while awaiting the commandant's reply, the young envoy from Virginia played a diplomatic game for the friendship of the Indians. When the French plied the Indians with liquor, young Washington promised them guns; and the game of diplomacy, seasoned with savagery, went on between the grizzled cavalier, old in the arts of war and duplicity, and the young Virginia major, who possessed common sense and humor whith.

After the awful slaughter of Fort Duquesne, into which he had rushed from a bed of fever, in a vain attempt to save Braddock and his army, Major Washington was left in command of the scattered forces. At this time he wrote to his brother "Jack" a letter, which at least suggests Mark Twain's attitude toward the "grossly exaggerated" story of his own death:

"Dear Brother: As I have heard, since my arrival at this place, a circumstantial account of my death and dying speech, I take this early opportunity of contradicting the first, and of assuring you that I have not as yet composed the latter."

But by the all-powerful dispensations of Providence I have been protected beyond all human probability and expectation, for I had four bullets through my coat and two horses shot under me yet escaped unhurt, altho' death was leveling my companions on every side of me!

"We have been most scandalously beaten by a trifling body of men, but fatigue and want of time will prevent me from giving you the details until I have the happiness of seeing you at Mount Vernon."

War is not supposed to develop the latent sense of humor in a commanding general, but Washington's wit never forsook him. His successful stratagems were little more than practical jokes raised to the highest power. They always "worked," and then he waited, laughing in his military sleeve, while his fat-witted enemies tried to play his own tricks back on him. Even in his retreats and escapes from the British—as at Long Island and before Princeton—he laughed and kicked up nimble heels in the face of the surruling enemy.

It was while his headquarters were in Jersey that Washington perpetrated the great Jersey joke still perpetuated by so many millions. He told an English traveler named Weld that he "was never so much annoyed by mosquitoes, for they used to bite through the thickest boot."

When the war was over the victorious commander entertained the vanquished general, Lord Cornwallis, at dinner, with some of the leaders among the French allies. Washington presided. In calling for toasts, Cornwallis, with an obliviousness of the changed conditions that was truly English, proposed "The King of England" as a subject for high praise.

The other guests were in consternation. Would the presiding genius, on whose very head King George had set a price, resent this as an insult? "The King of England," announced the toastmaster general, raising his glass. The guests gazed at him, transfixed with astonishment.

"Long may he," continued Washington. "—Long may he stay there!"

He pronounced the last two words in a stage whisper, with a shrug and a rueful grimace which made all the company, including Lord Cornwallis, who now saw his mistake, applaud with hearty laughter; and Washington's ready humor had prevented a disagreeable complication.

After the Revolution, Washington was permitted the long-coveted happiness of living peacefully under his "own vine and figtree," as he called it hundreds of times in as many letters. It is a great mistake to think that his life at Mount Vernon was either staid or stilted. Nelly Custis, his adopted daughter, is authority for the statement that retired general was always full of gaiety and good spirits, surrounding himself with young people's company, enjoying their lively conversation, "particularly the jokes," as he once said. Nelly went so far as to claim that she found no one quite so willing to keep pace with her own extravagant spirits as her dear, delightful old foster father.

How Washington did enjoy his home when he was finally permitted to stay there! Mount Vernon was a Mecca for pilgrims from all over the world. He once wrote to Tobias Lear, "Unless some one pops in unexpectedly Mrs. Washington and myself will do what I believe has not within the last 20 years been done by us—that is, to sit down to dinner by ourselves!"



INTERNATIONAL SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSON

(By E. O. SELLERS, Director of Evening Department, the Moody Bible Institute, Chicago.)

LESSON FOR FEBRUARY 15.

CHRIST'S HATRED OF SHAMS.

LESSON TEXT—Luke 11:37-54.
GOLDEN TEXT—"Be not deceived: God is not mocked."—Gal. 6:7.

This is a strange breakfast episode (to "dine" means literally, to breakfast). Jesus accepted three such invitations from the Pharisees and was accused of being a glutton and a wine bibber, Matt. 11:19; Luke 7:36, 39, 44. In this instance we are told plainly (v. 54) why he had been asked to this feast. At a later time, e. g., during the Passion week, Jesus delivered a special discourse against the Pharisees (Matt. 23) in which he repeated many of the things we study today.

Must Be Clean.
I. False vs. True cleansing (vv. 37-44). The orthodox Jew is very punctilious to avoid ceremonial uncleanness. In Christ's time this ceremonialism was at its highest development. To be defiled was far worse than to be morally unclean. This Pharisee "marveled" that Jesus was not likewise concerned with his outward acts (v. 39, see also Matt. 23:25, 26). To have a clean cup and platter was more important than to have a clean heart. In a fragment of Gospel found at Oxyrhynchus, Jesus is reputed to have said to a Pharisee: "Thou hast washed in waters wherein dogs and swine have been cast, and wiped the outside skin which also harlots anoint and beautify, but within they are full of scorpions and all wickedness. But I have been dipped in the waters of eternal life which come from the throne of God." Pious platters, presented in pride, must be inwardly purified.

Jesus pronounces three "woes," griefs that like an avenging nemesis hang over men of such a character. (1) A "woe" against those who make a show of tithing the common garden mint and herbs and at the same time avoid the weightier matters of just relations to their fellow men and love to God (v. 42). We are not to neglect our churchly duties at all, but these cannot be substituted for righteousness (see Micha. 6:8). (2) A "woe" against those who love the places of pre-eminence (v. 43, cf. Matt. 23:6, 7). This spirit has not departed from the church after a lapse of centuries. It is unchristian, unchristlike. The great one must be the servant of all (Matt. 23:11, 20:28, John 13:14, 15, Phil. 2:5-8). (3) (v. 43). The third "woe" is directed against hypocrisy. To touch a grave was to become unclean, and hence they were white-washed to give men warning. Many Christians are without beautiful to behold, yet within full of dead men's bones and all manner of uncleanness.

The Three Woes.

II. Real vs. Sham Lives (vv. 45-54). The lawyers were the theologians, the expounders of the Mosaic law. Evidently the words of Jesus produced great conviction. The word "reproachful" (v. 45) means "to entreat spitefully," and the probabilities are that he spoke to Jesus as if to rebuke him. Jesus at once pronounces three woes upon him and his class. (1) A "woe" because they laid burdens upon others which they themselves would not even touch with one of their fingers (Matt. 23:4). That is, they added to the law minute and troublesome details, which they declared to be more important than the law itself. (2) (v. 47) A "woe" is pronounced upon them for honoring the dead prophets and at the same time rejecting and persecuting those that were living. To honor dead teachers, to praise the prophets of the past, those whom we cannot endure while living, is a form of hypocrisy which costs but little. It implies that had they lived in the days of their fathers their conduct would have been indifferent, yet they are with the living prophets, following the example of their fathers. God foresaw this (v. 49) and the faithful minister of his word must expect a like treatment (Mk. 10:29, 30). (3) (v. 12) The third "woe" was pronounced against these religious teachers because, possessing the key to knowledge, they neither entered themselves nor would they allow others to enter; "ye enter not in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering in to enter." (Matt. 23:13, Am. Rv.). These lawyers, theologians, were professedly interpreters of the law, that law which was the foundation and bulwark of the Jewish nation. In fact, however, they had so obscured and "explained" that law as to leave men in darkness. Supposed to lead men into truth, they were shutting them out of the truth. What a terrible indictment of many of this present age.

We quote from the letter of a Wisconsin business man: "The average man is interested in the teachings of the Bible. If the Bible cannot stand upon its own feet, it is foolish to bolster it up by any personal ideas. We make too many apologies for Scriptures and do not stand squarely by what it teaches." Not a few who occupy the position of teachers obscure the truth of God and they shut men out of a real knowledge of him. Jesus thus replies to both Pharisees and the lawyer, that character is not a garment to wear, but it is the inward furnishing of the heart.

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