

THE SOCIAL LIFE OF WASHINGTON.*

You have courteously invited me to address you upon some aspect of the life of Washington. It need hardly be said that in this connection themes innumerable must necessarily suggest themselves. It might be natural to speak of Washington as a soldier, a statesman or a philanthropist; but such subjects have been so exhaustively treated by men of the highest eminence that even for this patriotic assembly they may be presumed to have lost a part, at least, of their original fascination. The same might perhaps be said of any aspect of the life of this great man that could possibly be suggested; but it has occurred to me that the purposes of this association are no less social than patriotic, and for this reason, if for no other, I have determined to speak of "The Social Life of Washington," a theme which brings us nearer to him than he appears in camp or court, and may, perhaps, enable us to gather some fragments of his history that the ordinary reader is apt to pass unnoticed.

It is related that one day when Washington Irving was a little boy there was great enthusiasm when the President entered New York. The boy's Scotch nurse lifted him above her head that he might see the object of all this rejoicing. "Why," exclaimed the boy, "he's nothing but a man."

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We, too, may be able to discover that the father of his country was a mere man—a man of his age with all its strength and weakness—but withal worthy of the admiration which has so freely been accorded him by subsequent generations.

In order to comprehend our subject it may be well briefly to consider the social conditions of America during the Colonial period. It is plain, we think, that American society was organized on distinctly English lines, and that in this respect the difference between the several colonies was more apparent than real. The early settlers of New England, it is true, have been described as intelligent yeomanry; but after all they had an aristocracy of their own. It was to some extent based on education and force of character, but birth and social station were by no means undervalued. The early ministers—men like Cotton, Hooker and the Mathers—were “leviathans of learning,” but they also belonged to historical families, and it was the combination of these elements that made them the undoubted leaders of Church and State. There could be no greater disgrace than social ostracism; and one of the earliest punishments inflicted by a Massachusetts Court was to issue an order that a certain criminal should be deprived of the privilege of being called “Mister.” Even royalty was hardly recognized as the highest source of honor. Sir William Phipps and Sir William Peperell had been made baronets, but they were not socially as highly esteemed as others who had no handle to their names. “The King,” it was said, “might dub them Knights, but he could not make them gentlemen.”

In the province of New York the old Dutch families easily accommodated themselves to the prevailing senti-

ment. Many of them, it is said, had been originally of humble extraction; but they had been richer than other settlers, to begin with, and 150 years of wealth and station had almost elevated them to the position of European nobles. This was especially true of the Dutch patroons, but there were men of British descent who were hardly less distinguished. Sir William Johnson maintained almost royal state on his domain of 100,000 acres, and through his Indian wife, Molly Brant, was the uncrowned King of the Six Nations.

In Pennsylvania the social system was less completely organized. The foremost place was, indeed, claimed by Colonial officials and their descendants, and to these were subsequently added the wealthy "Barbadoes" merchants of Philadelphia. In country districts were the so-called iron-masters who gathered around them a large number of dependents—miners, laborers, charcoal burners, and even tenant farmers who cultivated the land after it had been cleared of its forests. There were, of course, here and there, professional men of extraordinary ability and enterprise who commanded a certain degree of social influence, and the fact has rarely been forgotten by their descendants. The clergy were personages of great importance, and in Philadelphia the German ministers, as well as the English, wore cocked hats, and appeared on the streets arrayed in black gowns when on their way to church. In Eastern Pennsylvania, says Dr. Jacobs, the ministers of the Lutheran and Reformed Churches were practically barons. They were proud of their European education and naturally took the lead in an unlettered community. Many of them laid great stress on their descent, and

Michael Schlatter, of the Reformed Church, never issued a marriage certificate without impressing it with his coat of arms. With all this, the fact is evident that, as the Colonial history of Pennsylvania was much more brief than that of the provinces to the north and south, its social conditions during the Colonial period remained unsettled.

It was, of course, in Virginia that the social idea was most completely developed. The number of families which were in some degree connected with the ruling families of England was greater than in other colonies, and there was a certain splendid hospitality which was elsewhere unattainable. The pioneers had brought the social ideals of England across the ocean, and at the very beginning the lines between the social classes had been firmly and distinctly drawn.

It has been said that in Virginia only two sciences were studied, genealogy and heraldry. This statement is not strictly correct—neither subject was studied as a science—but it is true that the proofs of gentle blood were very highly esteemed.

That George Washington was a gentleman born has never been doubted. His father was a rich man, though at his death the estate was reduced by being divided between five children. The Washingtons, however, were not one of the foremost families of the Old Dominion. They had held no prominent Colonial offices; they knew of no distinguished relatives in the mother country; they remained attached to the soil, and cultivated habits of economy and frugality. George Washington's mother appears to have been a woman of great dignity, but she was plain in her tastes and manners. The early training of Washing-

ton was, indeed, of the highest character—it was, in fact, far better than any which he could have received at a royal court; but I can hardly suppose that his fondness for the company of those who occupied a higher social position was derived from the lessons which he had received at home.

There were, it would seem, in his nature certain peculiarities which from the beginning attracted the attention of men of influence and culture. He was a silent boy, as he was afterwards a silent man. It may seem almost absurd to ascribe dignity to a half-grown boy, and yet if the term could ever be used in this way it certainly could be properly employed in the case of Washington. What a splendid page he might have been at the court of some European monarch! Always obedient—performing his duties with absolute precision—and addressing his superiors, when this became necessary, with so much respect that the briefest speech appeared to involve a personal compliment. He had not many opportunities for advanced education, but such as he had he employed to the utmost. His favorite teacher, Thomas Williams, deemed it a pleasure to spend many extra hours with this promising pupil in teaching him the art of surveying. By methods, apparently known to himself alone, he studied grammar and style; so that, though he never mastered the minute formalities of language, he could write vigorously, and, in the main, correctly. He kept notebooks, in which he carefully entered every precious aphorism—every bit of unusual learning—that came in his way, and thus he became intellectually rich. Though he was generally silent, we may be sure that whenever it became necessary to speak he never used the wrong word. Withal, he

was eminently truthful. The stories with which we are all familiar were gathered or invented by Mason L. Weems, a rather worthless clergyman, who at a much later date claimed to be the rector at Mount Vernon. That George Washington was in many respects a precocious boy is not to be doubted. Before he was out of his teens he was regularly employed as a surveyor by Lord Fairfax, who owned extensive tracts of land in the western part of the province. His stature was unusual and his physical strength was said to be enormous. Necessarily thrown into the company of men of culture, he learned how to conduct himself in their society, though he was never "a knight of the ball-room;" he laid little stress on the minor amenities of social life, though he was always careful to say and do the proper thing. He could turn a compliment in the style of Addison, but it was rarely spontaneous. He was believed to be destitute of the sense of humor, but is said on reflection to have laughed heartily on remembering a story which he had previously heard without a smile. In brief, in an age which esteemed personal dignity as the highest accomplishment he possessed that quality in a pre-eminent degree.

To tell the story of the early life of Washington is not our present purpose. His trials and escapes—his heroism in the French and Indian war and the honors which were conferred upon him by the provincial government—are not all these things written at length in the history of his country? There was, however, in his life, as in that of most other people, an event of transcendent importance, which was, from a social point of view, decidedly more interesting. When it became known that Colonel Washington was to marry the rich, young widow, Mar-

tha Dandridge Custis, society was greatly excited. The subject was, of course, discussed from every possible point of view, and the general conclusion was reached that it was an ideal match. The Colonel was already famous, and was otherwise socially eligible, while the bride belonged to the *creme de la creme* of society, and was withal the richest heiress in the province. We do not know much concerning the preliminaries of the marriage, for the bride burned her love-letters in later years, perhaps, for the purpose of protecting the dignity which in such communications is apt to become strained. We have, however, full accounts of the wedding, which was one of the most brilliant ever held in Virginia. "The bridegroom wore a suit of blue cloth, the coat being lined with red silk and ornamented with silver trimmings; his waistcoat was embroidered with white satin, his knee buckles were of gold and his hair was powdered. The bride was attired in white satin, a heavily corded white silk overdress, diamond buckles and pearl ornaments. The Governor, many members of the Legislature, British officers, and the neighboring gentry were present in full court dress. Washington's body-servant, Bishop, a tall negro, to whom he was much attached, and who had accompanied him on all his military campaigns, stood in the porch (of the church), clothed in the scarlet uniform of the royal army in the reign of George II. The bride and her three attendants drove back to the White House in a coach drawn by six horses, led by liveried postillions, Colonel Washington and an escort of cavaliers riding by its side."

The life of the Washingtons at Mount Vernon for the next fifteen years was very much like that of the higher classes in England. They kept

up a great establishment, but, as Mrs. Washington was an excellent manager, it is said that there was comparatively little waste. There were plenty of servants, and the table was abundantly furnished with guests, though it must be remembered that, as John Randolph said, there is a great difference between hospitality and familiarity. There were balls and receptions, and dignified ladies and gentlemen danced stately minuets, but, after all, this grandeur was but local, and must in time have become sufficiently tedious.

During the War of the Revolution there were in the camp seasons of trial and privation. Mrs. Washington visited her husband as often as possible, and patiently shared in the troubles of the times. Upham says that during the whole of the war the General was never known to smile. It would, however, be a mistake to suppose that during this period the usages of good society were neglected. On the contrary, General Washington and all the members of his military family observed the strictest rules of etiquette. Thus, for instance, General Alexander—generally known as Lord Stirling, because he claimed to be the true heir to the earldom of that name—always insisted on being addressed as “My Lord,” even by his superiors in military rank. European noblemen, like Lafayette, Steuben, Pulaski, De Woedtke and Du Portail, gave tone to the society, and De Kalb, one of the bravest generals of the line—keeping well his secret that he was not really of aristocratic birth—was, perhaps, the most dignified and punctilious of them all.

Of course, the Revolution was too popular and comprehensive to be exclusively directed by a single class. Old Indian fighters once more buckled on their armor, and soon achieved a

celebrity of which they had never dreamed. Generals like Israel Putnam, James Reed and Nicholas Herkimer performed prodigies of valor, but would never have confessed that the pen is mightier than the sword. These men were, of course, treated with the greatest possible respect, but it must be confessed that they never belonged to the intimate social circle that gathered around the person of the commander.

When the war was over it was found that the ideals of society had greatly changed. Fame had opened doors which could never afterwards be closed. Room was more readily made for the new-comers, because many of the social leaders had left the country. Old Virginia, however, remained firmly attached to its ancient ideals. When Washington became President he deemed it his duty to magnify his office in every possible way. He seems to have feared that in the young republic, official station would be vulgarized, and that the people would lose respect for the man who had been chosen to conduct the affairs of State. When it was doubted by what title the President should be addressed, Washington declared himself in favor of "Your High Mightiness," the words used in Holland in approaching the Stadtholder. The phrase was, however, rejected, as being too grandiloquent, and the more moderate term, "Your Excellency," was made to take its place.

We have read about the republican court of George Washington, but often fail to realize how closely it imitated the customs of European royalty. Higginson tells us that when the President rode to the sessions of Congress he went in a State-coach, of which the body was in the shape of a hemisphere, cream-colored, bordered with flowers 'round the panels, and orna-

mented with figures representing cupids and supporting festoons. On great occasions the coach was drawn by six horses, on ordinary occasions by four, and on Sundays by two only. The driver, footmen and outriders wore liveries of white and scarlet.

During his Presidency, Washington was careful to invite to dine all who might have claims on his hospitality. There were also weekly receptions, and these the members of Congress were expected to attend in regular order. The invitations were neatly engraved, and sealed in wax with the family arms of the President. To be invited to these receptions was regarded as a great honor, but Gouverneur Morris has recorded his impression that they were the most dreary functions that could possibly be imagined. "The President, arrayed in black velvet, with silver buckles on his knees, stood before the open fireplace and received his visitors like a demigod, never shaking hands or entering into familiar conversation."

It can hardly be said that Washington was successful in establishing a permanent social standard. A new party was coming to the front which insisted that great harm was done by the imitation of customs that prevailed in foreign countries. Washington himself did not escape severe criticism, but so far as we know he never changed his mind. He believed—as many others have believed since his day—that the greatest danger that befalls a republic consists in the breaking of grand ideals. There is but a short step between vulgarity and crime, and a people which has lost respect for earthly dignities is only too apt to turn away from those which are heavenly.

Washington was a grand personality, but he was not exempt from human weakness. In the course of

time he has become to most of us a splendid ideal rather than a historic personage. As Stuart, the painter, glorified his features, so his biographers have idealized his life. Possibly he was too hard and cold to have many intimate friends, and his dignity might be less impressive now than it was in the days of his Presidency. There were, however, certain facts in his social relations which all succeeding generations should keep in memory. If society in the days of Washington was too dignified to be universally acceptable it can at least be confidently said that it was not foolish. It was not the period of shallow compliments and superficial graces. We appreciate the value of social enjoyment—there must be a place for amusements in every community, and without it life would hardly be worth living. There is, however, a nobler purpose in social life; it consists of the development of the higher qualities of our nature until they reach the greatest excellence of which they are susceptible. Our object is, in scriptural language, "That our sons may be as plants in their youth; that our daughters may be as corner-stones polished after the similitude of a palace."

Another peculiarity of social life in the days of Washington was the keen sense of honor by which it was constantly pervaded. It may be that men were sometimes led to punctilious extremes, but, after all, there was a universal feeling that

"Good name in man and woman
Is the immediate jewel of their souls."

Wealth and station were esteemed, as they deserved to be, but there was no temptation to condone the moral delinquencies of a millionaire. Social position was a treasure which money

could not buy. In this respect, at least, the social life of Washington presents us an example that cannot be too highly esteemed.

Study that period as closely as we may, we find no signs of decadence. Its tendency was upwards and onwards towards the realization of a grand ideal. To what extent it has been realized let others tell. We have traveled far, and the dust of the way is clinging to our feet; but in our social life, no less than in political, we still behold before us and above us the immortal form of Washington.

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