

A M E R I C A N C L A S S I C S

GEORGE
WASHINGTON
by
WOODROW
WILSON

A fascinating biography of one
great presidency that gives
a foreglimpse of another

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George Washington

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GEORGE WASHINGTON

TO
E. A. W.
WITHOUT WHOSE SYMPATHY AND COUNSEL
LITERARY WORK WOULD LACK
INSPIRATION

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IN WASHINGTON'S DAY

GEORGE WASHINGTON

CHAPTER I

GEORGE WASHINGTON was bred a gentleman and a man of honor in the free school of Virginian society, with the generation that first learned what it meant to maintain English communities in America in safety and a self-respecting independence. He was born in a season of quiet peace, when the plot of colonial history was thickening noiselessly and almost without observation. He came to his first manhood upon the first stir of revolutionary events; caught in their movement,

he served a rough apprenticeship in arms at the thick of the French and Indian war; the Revolution found him a leader and veteran in affairs at forty-four; every turn of fortune confirmed him in his executive habit of foresight and mastery; death spared him, stalwart and commanding, until, his rising career rounded and complete, no man doubted him the first character of his age. "Virginia gave us this imperial man," and with him a companion race of statesmen and masters in affairs. It was her natural gift, the times and her character being what they were; and Washington's life showed the whole process of breeding by which she conceived so great a generosity in manliness and public spirit.

The English colonies in America lay very tranquil in 1732, the year in which Washington was born. It fell in a season betweentimes, when affairs lingered, as if awaiting a change. The difficulties and anxieties of first settlement were long ago past and done with in all the principal colonies. They had been hardening to their "wilderness work," some of them, these hundred years and more. England could now reckon quite six hundred thousand subjects upon the long Atlantic seaboard of the great continent which had lain remote and undiscovered through so many busy ages, until daring sailors hit upon it at last amidst the stir of the adventurous fifteenth century; and there was no longer any thought that her colonists would draw back or falter in what they had undertaken. They had grown sedate even and self-poised, with somewhat of the air of old communities, as they extended their settlements upon the coasts and rivers and elaborated their means of self-government amidst the still forests, and each had already a bearing and character of its own. 'Twas

easy to distinguish the New-Englander from the man of the southern colonies; and the busy middle provinces that stretched back from the great bay at New York and from the waters of the spreading Delaware had also a breed of their own, like neither the men of the south nor the men of the northeast. Each region had bred for itself its characteristic communities, holding their own distinctive standards, knowing their own special purposes, living their own lives with a certain separateness and independence.

Virginia, the oldest of the colonies, was least to be distinguished by any private character of her own from the rural communities of England herself. Her population had come to her almost without selection throughout every stage of quick change and troubled fortune that England had seen during the fateful days since James Stuart became king; and Englishmen in Virginia were in no way radically distinguishable from Englishmen in England, except that they were provincials and frontiersmen. They had their own tasks and ways of life, indeed, living, as they did, within the old forests of a virgin continent, upon the confines of the world. But their tastes and temperament, spite of change and seclusion, they had in common with Englishmen at home. They gave leave to their opinions, too, with a like downright confidence and hardihood of belief, never doubting they knew how practical affairs should go. They had even kept the English character as they had received it, against the touch of time and social revolution, until Virginians seemed like elder Englishmen. England changed, but Virginia did not. There landed estates spread themselves with an ample acreage along the margins of the streams that every-

where threaded the virgin woodland; and the planter drew about him a body of dependants who knew no other master; to whom came, in their seclusion, none of that quick air of change that had so stirred in England throughout all her century of revolution. Some were his slaves, bound to him in perpetual subjection. Others were his tenants, and looked upon him as a sort of patron. In Maryland, where similar broad estates lay upon every shore, the law dubbed a great property here and there a "manor," and suffered it to boast its separate court baron and private jurisdiction. Virginian gentlemen enjoyed independence and authority without need of formal title.

There was but one centre of social life in Virginia: at Williamsburg, the village capital, where the Governor had his "palace," where stood the colonial college, where there were taverns and the town houses of sundry planters of the vicinage, and where there was much gay company and not a little formal ceremonial in the season. For the rest, the Old Dominion made shift to do without towns. There was no great mart to which all the trade of the colony was drawn. Ships came and went upon each broad river as upon a highway, taking and discharging freight at the private wharves of the several plantations. For every planter was his own merchant, shipping his tobacco to England, and importing thence in return his clothes, his tools, his household fittings, his knowledge of the London fashions and of the game of politics at home. His mechanics he found among his own slaves and dependants. Their "quarters" and the offices of his simple establishment showed almost like a village of themselves where they stood in irregular groups about his own square, broad-

gabled house, with its airy hall and homelike living-rooms. He might have good plate upon his sideboard and on his table, palatable old wine in his cellar, and on the walls about him portraits of the stately men and dames from whom he took his blood and breeding. But there was little luxury in his life. Plain comfort and a homely abundance sufficed him. He was a gentleman, owned all he saw around him, exercised authority, and enjoyed consideration throughout the colony; but he was no prince. He lived always in the style of a provincial and a gentleman commoner, as his neighbors and friends did.

Slaves, dependants, and planters, however, did not by any means make up the tale of Virginia's population. She had been peopled out of the common stock of Englishmen, and contained her own variety. Most of the good land that lay upon the lower courses of the James, the York, the Rappahannock, and the Potomac rivers, and upon the bay on either hand, had been absorbed into the estates of the wealthier planters, who began to conceive themselves a sort of aristocracy; but not a few plain men owned their own smaller tracts within the broad stretches of country that lay back from the rivers or above their navigable depth. Upon the western front of the colony lived sturdy frontiersmen; and no man was so poor that he might not hope by thrift to hold his own with the best in the country. Few could own slaves in any number, for the negroes counted less than a third in a reckoning of the whole population. There were hired servants besides, and servants bound for a term of years by indenture; even criminals who could be had of the colony for private service; but most men must needs work their own plots of ground and devise

a domestic economy without servants. A wholesome democratic spirit pervaded the colony, which made even the greater planters hesitate to give themselves airs. A few families that had thriven best and longest, and had built up great properties for themselves, did indeed lay claim, as royal governors found to their great displeasure, to a right to be heard before all others in the management of the government. But they could of course show no title but that of pride and long practice. 'Twas only their social weight in the parish vestries, in the Council, and in the House of Burgesses that gave them ascendancy.

It was the same in church as in state. Virginia prided herself upon having maintained the Establishment without schism or sour dissent; but she had maintained it in a way all her own, with a democratic constitution and practice hardly to be found in the canons. Nominally the Governor had the right of presentation to all livings; but the vestries took care he should seldom exercise it, and, after they had had their own way for a century, claimed he had lost it by prescription. They chose and dismissed and ruled their ministers as they would. And the chief planters were nowhere greater figures than in the vestries of their own parishes, where so many neighborhood interests were passed upon—the care of the poor, the survey of estates, the correction of disorders, the tithe rates, and the maintenance of the church and minister. Sometimes the church building was itself the gift of the chief landowner of the parish; and the planters were always the chief rate-payers. Their leadership was natural and unchallenged. They enjoyed in their own neighborhood a sort of feudal pre-eminence, and the men about them

easily returned in thought and estimation to that elder order of English life in which the chief proprietor of the country-side claimed as of course the homage of his neighbors. There were parishes, not a few, indeed, in which there was no such great planter to command consideration by a sort of social primacy. It was, after all, only here and there, and in the older parts of the colony, that affairs awaited the wish of privileged individuals. But it was the ascendancy of the greater planters which most struck the imagination, and which gave to Virginia something of the same air and tone and turn of opinion that existed in England, with its veritable aristocracy, its lordly country gentlemen, its ancient distinctions of class and manners.

Those who took counsel in England concerning colonial affairs had constant occasion to mark the sharp contrast between the easy-going Virginians, who were no harder to govern than Englishmen everywhere, and the men of the northeastern colonies, with their dry reserve and their steadfast resolution not to be governed at all. These seemed unlike Englishmen elsewhere; a whit stiffer, shrewder, more self-contained and circumspect. They were, in fact, a peculiar people. Into New England had come a selected class, picked out of the general mass of Englishmen at home by test of creed. "God sifted the whole nation," one of their own preachers had told them, at election-time, in the far year 1668, "that he might send choice grain out into this wilderness." But the variety of the old life in England had been lost in the sifting. The Puritan, for all he was so strong and great a figure in his day, was but one man among a score in the quick and various English life. His single standard and manner of

living, out of the many that strove for mastery in the old seats where the race was bred, had been transferred to New England; and he had had separate and undisputed ascendancy there to build new commonwealths as he would. The Puritan Commonwealth in England had been the government of a minority. Cromwell had done his work of chastening with a might and fervor which he found, not in the nation, but in himself and in the stout men-at-arms and hardy reformers who stood with him while he purified England and brought upon all her foes a day of reckoning. The people had stood cowed and uneasy while he lived, and had broken into wild excess of joy at their release when he died. But in New England an entire community consented to the Puritan code and mastery with a hearty acquiescence. It was for this liberty they had come over sea.

And the thoughtful, strong-willed men who were their leaders had built, as they wished, a polity that should last. Time wrought its deep changes in New England, as elsewhere, but the stamp set upon these Puritan settlements by the generation that founded them was not effaced. Trade made its characteristic mark upon them. Their merchants had presently their own fleets and markets. Their hardy people took more and more to the sea, lived the rough life of the ocean ways with a relish, beat in their small craft up and down the whole coast of the continent, drove bargains everywhere, and everywhere added a touch to their reputation as doughty sea-dogs and shrewd traders. The population that after a while came to New England did not stay to be sifted before attempting the voyage out of the Old World, and the quaint sedateness of the settlements began to be broken by a novel variety. New men beset the old

order; a rough democracy began to make itself felt; and new elements waxed bold amidst the new conditions that time had wrought. The authority of the crown at last made a place of command for itself, despite every stubborn protest and astute evasion. It became necessary to be a trifle less observant of sect and creed, to cultivate, as far as might be, a temper of tolerance and moderation. But it was a slow change at best. The old order might be modified, but it could not so soon be broken. New England, through all her jurisdictions, remained a body of churches, as well as a body of towns, submissive to the doctrine and discipline of her learned clergy, keeping the old traditions distinct, indubitable, alike in her schools and her meeting-houses. Even in Rhode Island, where there had from the first been such diversity of creed and license of individual belief, there was little variety of type among the people, for all they counted themselves so free to be what they would. There was here a singular assortment, no doubt, of the units of the stock, but it was of the Puritan stuff, none the less, through all its variety.

New England, indeed, easily kept her character, for she lived apart. Her people mustered a full hundred thousand strong before the seventeenth century was out; her towns numbered many score, both upon the margins of the sea and within the forests; but she still lay within a very near frontier, pushed back only a short journey from the coast. Except where the towns of Connecticut ran in broken line close to the westward strait of Long Island Sound, a broad wilderness of untouched woodland, of thicketed hills and valleys that no white man yet had seen, stretched between them