

## WASHINGTON AND FREDERICK THE GREAT.

### WITH THE STORY OF A MYTHICAL SWORD.

"FROM the oldest General in the world to the Greatest." Such is the legend said to have been engraved on a sword sent by Frederick the Great to George Washington. Until thirty years ago, when this famous sword fell into the hands of John Brown at Harper's Ferry, no doubt appears to have been raised as to the truth of the story. It appears to have been generally believed by the Washington and Lewis families. In a recent note from Mr. H. L. D. Lewis, of Audley (grandson of Nelly Custis Lewis), he says, "I am almost sure that I have heard my grandmother, who died in this house, speak of a sword given to Washington by Frederick." There being no sentence on any sword of Washington's the tradition was modified: it was said that the phrase was a verbal message sent by Frederick to Washington. It has flourished perennially in this form also; it has got into the "Encyclopedia of Biography"; a few years ago it was used by Senator Voorhees to induce the Senate to purchase another sword of Washington. The present writer once contributed something to the circulation of the legend. The incident of John Brown's getting possession of the identical sword inspired a little romance which was published in a periodical I edited in Cincinnati ("The Dial," January, 1860). My story was called "Excalibur," the sword of King Arthur, which was traced to Frederick, to Washington, and finally to John Brown. But on discovering that no sentence was engraved on the sword I became skeptical, and, after some further inquiries, reached the belief that it was a myth. The absence of any reference to the alleged present in Washington's will seems, indeed, conclusive. Washington is generally particular in mentioning the history of each thing bequeathed. In one instance he seems to have been inaccurate; "To the Rev. now Bryan Lord Fairfax I give a Bible, in three large folio volumes, with notes, presented to me by the Right Rev. Thomas Wilson, Bishop of Sodor and Man." This bishop died in 1755, before Braddock's defeat, when Washington was little known. The Bible was probably presented by the bishop's son, the Rev. Thomas Wilson, D. D. Generally, however, Washington was exact in such matters, and he could hardly have undervalued a gift from Frederick the Great, whose bust he ordered for Mount Vernon, and whose works (Holcroft's trans-

lation, thirteen volumes) were in his library. The bequest of his swords is impressive:

To each of my nephews, William Augustine Washington, George Lewis, George Steptoe Washington, Bushrod Washington, and Samuel Washington, I give one of the swords of which I may die possessed: and they are to *chuse* in the order they are named. These swords are accompanied with an injunction not to unsheathe them for the purpose of shedding blood, except it be for self-defense, or in defense of their country and its rights; and in the latter case to keep them unsheathed, and prefer falling with them in their hands, to the relinquishment thereof.

It is tolerably certain that if any of the swords had been the gift of Frederick it would here have been referred to. In addition it may be remarked that on none of the swords is there any sign of German workmanship. There is, indeed, nothing on this sword, which the State was partly induced to purchase because of its legend. To use the words of Mr. Howell, of our State Library, "The impression that the sight of it made on me—with its steel beads instead of jewels—was that it was a very negligently present for a monarch to make to a man like Washington."

Soon after Carlyle had concluded his Life of Frederick, I asked him whether he had met with any incident or phrase on which our American legend might have been based. "None at all." I believe I answered, "So much the worse for Frederick." At any rate he replied sharply, "Washington was no immeasurable man." Carlyle would have been put to it if challenged to find so brave a decoration for Frederick as this mythical tribute to Washington invented for him by the American people. So far as Washington is concerned the story is much more honorable as a fable than it could be as a reality. It would appear to have impressed General Winfield Scott, who, as I have heard, presented a book to General McClellan inscribed, "From the oldest general in the world to the greatest."

Indeed, from the moment of my certain discovery that the incident was not historical I became deeply interested in it. The symbolism of the story—the passing of the sword from the old world to the new—seemed too poetic to be a popular invention; yet I have been unable to discover among heroic anecdotes any epigrammatic saying which might

have suggested "from the oldest general in the world to the greatest." It may be that some querist can tell us whence the phrase came. But my search into this bit of American mythology has led to facts of historic interest.

The story was originally told not of Frederick's sword, but of his portrait. In the "New Jersey Journal" of August 9, 1780, of which there is a copy in the New York Historical Society, occurs the following:

The King of Prussia not long since presented his Excellency General Washington with the picture of his Majesty, taken to the life, inscribed under, "From the oldest general in Europe to the greatest general on earth." A celebrated general of his Majesty's (over whom conquest never gained dominion), on viewing the inscription, asked, "Why does he stand higher in the annals of fame than myself?" "Consider," replied this illustrious artist in the science of war: "you never fought but at the head of troops in number, discipline, bravery, ardor, and full of hopes vying with any commander's; but this noble chief has encountered every embarrassment, and by his united abilities (complete to constitute the general indeed) has surmounted untold difficulties; and thereby justly stands entitled to such laurels as conquest, fame, and magnanimity only can give."

Was any such picture sent to Washington? There is no evidence of it beyond the above anecdote. Louis XVI. presented Washington with a portrait of himself (an engraving), but that was six years after the story in the "New Jersey Journal." In late years, when so many Washington relics have been offered to the public, it is not likely that one so precious would be withheld. Diligent inquiries among the kindred of Washington have failed to discover any trace of a portrait of Frederick at Mount Vernon, except the bust made by its owner's order. The Washington and Lewis families are indeed extensive; and it is barely possible that some picture of Frederick from Mount Vernon, overlooked in the search after swords, may yet be discovered among them; but no such inscription could have been hid.

So far as any testimony can be derived from the voluminous works of Frederick, and the many anecdotes concerning him, he was little interested in Washington. I have explored his volumes, also Laveaux, Bourdais, Thiébault, and Carlyle, and cannot find that Frederick ever mentioned Washington's name but once. In his "Memoirs from the Peace of Hubertsburg to the Partition of Poland" (Holcroft, Vol. IV., p. 175) Frederick says:

General Washington, who was called at London the chief of the rebels, gained, at the commencement of hostilities, some advantages over the royalists who were assembled near Boston.

That is all that appears from the oldest general in the world concerning the greatest! His

silence concerning Washington is the more remarkable because his sympathies were, in a mild way, with the Americans. "The scene which is acting in America," he writes (to D'Alembert, at Paris, May 16, 1776), "and which perhaps is preparing for other parts, is to us like the combats of gladiators, which the Romans (somewhat barbarous in the practice) sat tranquil spectators of in the circus, and which those monarchs of mankind made their amusement. The same actors cannot always appear on the stage; we have exhibited long enough, others must now take their turn. Your philosophy may, therefore, reflect at its ease on the cause and effects of that destructive war which now ravages America." D'Alembert, who had elicited this, repeatedly tried to get some opinion on the subject from Frederick. "We are told," writes D'Alembert (April 28, 1777), "the English depopulate Germany to send troops to America. It does not seem to me very polite, and still less honorable, to see many petty German princes send their subjects two thousand leagues to be murdered that their masters may maintain an opera house. It is reported that most of the soldiers settle in America, and this seems to me the best part they can take." In his replies Frederick does not allude to this Hessian business. On June 3, 1777, he casually says, "War still continues to be made on the poor American." Then D'Alembert becomes pointed, and says (July 28, 1777), "I should be desirous of having your Majesty's opinion of this war, and of the manœuvres of Washington." Frederick answers (August 13), "Were I to follow the example of Cicero, and foretell what a certain combination of events seem to forebode, I should perhaps venture an opinion that the colonies will become independent, because they certainly will not be crushed this campaign, and the government of the God-dammes will find it difficult to dip in the purses of the people." Again, on June 8 of the very year in which the sword story is told (1780), D'Alembert writes: "We are here [Paris] in most impatient expectation of the success of this third campaign, especially in America. The insolence and piracy of the English have offended every nation in Europe." In his reply Frederick does not allude to the subject, but writes only of Voltaire: "To him I make my morning orisons. To him I say, Divine Voltaire, *ora pro nobis!*"

But there is something suspicious in Frederick's evasions. At the very time when D'Alembert was plying him with questions concerning America and Washington a startling incident occurred at Berlin, of which his French correspondents received no hint. The British Government, suspecting negotiations between Frederick and Arthur Lee, American agent

in Europe, ordered their minister (Elliot) at Berlin to steal Lee's papers. This was done June 25, 1777 — the agent, by the way, being that same Liston whom the British Government was impudent enough to appoint minister to the United States in Washington's second term. The stolen papers were restored after copies were taken. The copies have been kept so close that Carlyle was not allowed to see them while writing his history of Frederick. On hearing of the theft Frederick said, "Ugly business!" But he wrote to his brother Henry that he meant to suppress the facts. Here is evidence that Frederick had reasons of state for not saying anything about America or Washington at the moment when Hessians were being enlisted. It may also be inferred that if Frederick ever sent Washington a present, or made any such remark as that of our legend, it might have been through Arthur Lee. As Carlyle was not permitted to see the copies of the purloined papers, and as only a small proportion of them have been published in this country (in the "Life of Arthur Lee"), it appeared to me possible that something might be contained in the Lee manuscripts giving a clue to the legend. While writing my *Life of Randolph* I went through these papers pretty carefully. In them it appears that, instead of Frederick's sending any weapon or other gift to Washington, he got off on Lee, for a substantial sum, a lot of faulty weapons — one specimen musket, seen too late by Lee, being, as he protested to Baron Schulenburg, Frederick's minister, "one of the worst I ever beheld." For the rest, this minister's letters to Lee, saying why the king could not receive him, nor recognize American independence until France had done so, express but faint sympathy with our colonies, and in no instance mention the name of Washington.

We may thus feel tolerably certain that no gift was ever sent by Frederick the Great to Washington, and that he never recognized in any remark the greatness of Washington.

There was, however, a sword sent to Washington from Germany. In 1795 Theophilus Alte, of Solingen, made the sword, which was No. 428 in the Centennial Exhibition (loaned by Miss Alice Riggs), and sent it to General Washington by his son. The son did not take it to Washington, but pawned it at a tavern in Philadelphia for thirty dollars. A gentleman redeemed it and left it with another in Alexandria, who repaid the money and sent it to Washington. On it is Washington's name and an inscription in German: "Condemner of despotism, preserver of liberty, glorious man, take from my son's hands the sword, I beg you. A. Solingen." This translation was made for Washington, who thought it was Dutch, and

"Solingen" the name of a man at Amsterdam. But a year later Alte wrote to him and the facts came out. This was the sword chosen by George Steptoe Washington under the terms of his uncle's will. It was buried during the civil war, and is rusty, but its admirable workmanship is still evident. Washington was a good deal mystified about the sword, and instituted inquiries during the year in which he heard nothing from Alte or his son. It is possible that during that time the story which had been told about a picture of Frederick was modified into a sword legend.

But there was another gift to Washington which may be mentioned in this connection. Mrs. Ella Bassett Washington has shown me a charming diary kept by her grandfather, Robert Lewis (Washington's nephew), during the first months after the inauguration (1789), when he was the President's private secretary. Among the amusing entries is this: "April 30 Mrs. Duer made the President a compliment of a very curious East India pipe, which we all had the pleasure of smoking out of." This was also exhibited in the Loan Exhibition (No. 433), described as the "Water-jar of a Narghile Pipe"; at least I have little doubt that it is the same. It is described in the catalogue as "presented to Washington by Charles Frederick, Grand Duke of Baden." This bell-shaped bronze bowl, or "hubble-bubble," some seven inches high, has on its side the inlaid brass letters "G. W.," and on the bottom "Charles Frederick." How it came to be among President Madison's effects, at the sale of which it was purchased by the father of its present owner, Mr. Frederick McGuire of Washington, is not known; it was Washington's way to give his friends souvenirs of this kind. It may have been presented by Charles Frederick to Mrs. Duer; possibly, indeed, this is a different pipe from that which she gave the President, and may have been sent him by the Grand Duke. It is improbable, however, that the philosophical Charles Frederick, who in 1772 published a work on "Political Economy," would have made so trivial a present. However that may be, the "hubble-bubble" would have attracted the Custis children before they could distinguish the "Charles Frederick" on it from the famous Frederick whose bust was a prominent ornament at Mount Vernon. The effigy of Frederick, the Frederick bronze, and the beautiful Solingen sword with its German inscription, may have been fused in their imaginations and taken the form of the old legend about the picture, which, as we have seen, appeared in 1780.

Perhaps no actuality can be cited which so illustrates the hold of Washington on the American heart as the history of this sword-myth.

There appears no reason why the legend should invest one of Washington's swords rather than another, and there is no indication that his nephew, Bushrod Washington, had any knowledge of the legend when he selected this one. No doubt he did so because it was Washington's dress sword. The New York State Library Report (January, 1874) says: "It was frequently worn by Washington on state occasions, as in 1791 when he received the Senate at his private residence in Philadelphia. It is represented also in some of the portraits of Washington; for example, the portrait painted by Vanderlyn for the United States House of Representatives in 1834. At the time when the sword of Washington and the staff of Franklin were presented in the House of Representatives in 1843, this sword 'from Frederick' was referred to as being still in the possession of one of the Washington family."

This presentation occurred February 8, 1843. The Honorable G. W. Summers, of Kanawha, Virginia, presented the articles for Samuel T. Washington, son of the Samuel (Washington's nephew) to whom was bequeathed the last choice of the swords. It appeared, however, that when the nephews assembled for the choice they agreed that the last should be first, since Samuel alone had taken military service with his uncle. Samuel selected the "service sword," marked "1757," which Washington had borne in all his great battles, having, to quote Summers, "preferred it to all the others, among which was the ornamented and costly present from the great Frederick."

This, of 1843, is the earliest reference to the mythical sword which I have found. It would be interesting to know whether the legend, "From the oldest general in the world to the greatest," was known at that time. It was not alluded to by any of the speakers in either House, among these being the venerable John Quincy Adams, who had made inquiries about the Alte sword in Holland while minister there. From that time, however, it was known that the supposed Frederick-Washington sword had passed to Bushrod, and on his death to his brother George Corbin Washington. On the death of the latter (1854) the sword was inherited by his son Colonel Lewis William Washington, and was among the many Washington relics of his mansion, Bel Air, Halltown, Harper's Ferry.

Colonel Lewis Washington's treasures have had eventful histories. Of his two pistols of Lafayette, one was stolen in Philadelphia in 1841, while on its way to a charitable exhibition in New York; the other fell into the hands of John Brown's son, and was restored by Hyatt in 1860. A watch seal lost by Wash-

ington on the field of Braddock's defeat was found there amid flattened bullets by Daniel Boone Logan in 1842, and was restored to Colonel Lewis Washington in 1856. In 1827 another of Washington's seals was lost by his father while hunting in Montgomery County, Maryland, where it was found by a farmer (Cleggett) in 1844 and restored. But the career of the sword was not accidental, while much more wonderful.

When John Brown went to conquer the South with twenty-three men he believed that the less he trusted arms of flesh the more Jehovah might be depended on to unsheathe his sword. The only other sword Brown considered worthy to be used by the Almighty was that which Washington was said to have received from Frederick the Great. One of Brown's men (Cook) came as a spy to Bel Air, and was hospitably shown the Washington relics for which he inquired. Brown told Colonel Washington, after taking him prisoner, that he wished to get hold of the sword "because it has been used by two successful generals." The superstition cost him dear. In order to get the sword Brown detached six of his men to go after it—five miles away. He thus lost half a day, and all chance of escape. Seventeen lives were offered as on an altar before this mythical sword.

When the war came on Colonel Lewis Washington confided this sword, with other family treasures, to a poor neighbor, Mr. Odin, indebted to him from boyhood for many kindnesses. Bel Air was vainly searched by Union soldiers for the famous sword. No one thought of searching the humble cabin of Odin.

Odin! Significant name! Mr. Albert Welles, surpassing all the ambitious pedigrees invented for Washington, has boldly derived him from the god Odin. But Odin was preëminently the "god of the sword." Mythologists have identified Odin's sword as the lightning; but from it are descended, by mythological lineage, the supernatural sword of Siegfried, Arthur's "Excalibur," and the equally mythical sword which Frederick the Great sent to Washington. Mythologically these are all one and the same sword. By the fabulous consecration of Washington's name the sword had raised Frederick to honors he nowise merited, had been pictured in Congress as ornamented and costly, had pierced the heart of Brown and was wielded by his "marching" soul; while in reality it was an ordinary piece of American manufacture which a "poor white" Odin protected in his cabin, and which, by its mythical fame, brought Mrs. Washington a larger sum from New York than any actually historical relic in her possession.