

HIS EXCELLENCY, GEORGE WASHINGTON

by BRANCH CABELL

WITH some slight ambiguousness, Sir, has that nation to which you stand *in loco parentis* evinced its filial piety by making yours the most frequently met with of human faces throughout America. At first glance it might well be esteemed flattering that your portrait should adorn our dollar bills and our most often used postage stamps. Yet in its monetary form is the compliment open to question in so far that at the instant I write no living creature knows what an American dollar may represent before sunset, beyond the certainty of its being something rather different to-morrow morning; nor upon consideration am I persuaded that any really reflective person would care to be commemorated on a postage stamp, which begins its career by being spit on, and ends by being punched in the face.

None the less is it fitting that your grave and wary features should grace that present puzzle, the American dollar, and that you should preside, whether in kingly scarlet or in imperial purple, over the enigmas of every day's mail. For you, when all is said, and when your innumerable biographers have striven their utmost, you remain, still, a mystery. In the aforementioned portraits your likeness to the Great Sphinx of Gizeh is plainly to be recognized; accident has a bit helped out the likeness, one grants, with the shape of your wig; and yet do you wear the resemblance justifiably. I at least, after reading I know not how many scores of books about you, books which explained you to your last least virtue and failing, find myself without any firm faith in any one of these explanations. It seems to me that with you, as with Shakespeare, it is not possible to divine your inmost nature; and that the biographers have but fumbled about both of you with countless wild gambols of guesswork.

In popular opinion, meanwhile, you endure as a sort of Americanized King Alfred—as the sublime and wise and painstakingly practical leader of a great people through dark times of disaster, as *one* who was always calm under fortune's malignity, and calm too in the splendor of his ultimate triumph. Both of you seem a bit statuesque; and, in public imagination at least, you keep the immobility of a statue. Alfred, as the mind sees him, sits perpetually over the neatherd's cakes, with his wise, grave face lighted by the cottage fire; but you, Sir, you kneel forever in the too celebrated snow of Valley Forge, praying and half congealed. We feel somehow that at no time afterward were you quite thawed out.

Yet that also is guesswork. One does not assuredly know anything about you, as a human being. And it follows that your relations with posterity remain as formal and as un intimate as were your relations with most mortals who endured the somewhat tremendous moral strain of conversing with you in the flesh.

For what, after all, can any man existent declare, with any certainty, as to the person who lived behind your Sphinx-like countenance? We know that under the grave mask lurked always a violent, nay, a verily volcanic temper, arduously controlled; that you were, but well knew yourself to be, undesirably slow of wit, and controlled this weakness by speaking (upon the infrequent occasions when you spoke at all) only after a majestic amount of deliberation; and that, with an incredible steadfastness, you controlled every important step in your life by the dictates of common-sense.

"Controlled" I have said three times in the one sentence; it is the word which thought associates with you inevitably. Always, and in his every function, George Washington presents the spectacle of a superb if rather stiffish gentleman exercising, in some or another form, the virtue of self-control. But against what human frailties, what soft temptings, what inner whisperings, what doubts? Well, there you leave us, once more, to guesswork. We can assert only that

you lived in a perpetual, proud, and somewhat wary reserve, from which you were released just now and then by an outburst of your enormous, of your deific, anger.

Nor, I think, could much more than this be declared, with any certainty, by any person who observed you going stately about earth. With no man, after at any rate your boyhood had been put by, do you appear to have been even moderately familiar. Equally, after the first fervors of boyhood, did any of womankind fail ever to dispel your reserve. Twice, it is known, you went a-wooing formally; but upon each passionate pilgrimage was your guide common-sense, and the lady an heiress born of a family a good bit outranking the Washingtons.

Everywhere, in brief, do you, as a person, remain a mystery and a most fit symbol of the American dollar and of the unpredictable contents of the postman's mail-bag. Yet even though your nature be hidden, we are permitted to pry some distance into your thoughts.

For, by an odd turn, we know, and we know precisely, what you are forever thinking about on our postage stamps, and, to every appearance, on our dollar bills also. Gilbert Stuart himself has recorded how, when he set about painting this picture, he "despaired of finding in that composed and quiet face any expression of the qualities which the whole world knew and might reasonably expect in a portrait." He despaired, that is, until, on an afternoon walk, the two of you met a farmer who had overreached you, Sir, in a small trading transaction. At the sight of your quondam swindler "the spirit of the General and the President leaped forth"—and, to Mr. Stuart's vast joy, your features took on just the expression which he needed and has faithfully preserved for posterity upon our two- and three-cent stamps.

In brief, Sir, you endure among us in the attitude of a gentleman who is conscious of having been swindled. And I, for one, I would very much prefer to regard the fact as an unexplained dispensation of Providence, that at every turn our Democracy should be faced by the Father of the Country in this particular frame of mind.

For more than any other man you contributed to our making as a nation: without any dissent the Republic acclaims you its founder. Yet is it true that the régime which you meant to perpetuate was but an extension of the benevolent Virginian oligarchy into which you had so stiffly and resolutely climbed, to become its chief ornament. And your opinion as to any lackwit who put faith in the French poisons of Democracy you were at pains, during the latter years of your life, to express with exactitude: "My opinion is that you could as soon scrub the blackamoor white as to change the principle of a professed Democrat, and that he will leave nothing unattempted to overthrow the government of this country."

So I am afraid there is no getting around the fact that you expected to have the national and local affairs of America administered by the gentry of America. Not to foresee the future is very often the reward of self-sacrifice, one rejoices to note. And it occurs to me that if ever, in the fashion of Macbeth, you had been granted a vision of your successors in the Presidency, you would for no long while have retained the relatively mild purple tints which you wear on our postage stamps. . . . But at this point I shudder; and hastily I dismiss the too harrowing mental picture. One cannot bear to think of George Washington as being thus bedevilled by a Polk or a Johnson, or thus haunted by a Hayes and a Harding. One feels—somehow—that in any such circumstances the Sphinx would once more have spoken, deifically and without restraint.

No (I conclude), the remarks of George Washington when confronted by his successors are remarks which simply do not bear thinking about. So I elect instead, Sir, to think about your achievements. They were stupendous: for you created that vast America which the rest of the world to-day contemplates, if not exactly with unbridled envy, at least with appropriate emotions. Your work endures, forever increasingly. And yet no hour passes wherein I do not find you observing your life's work, your so laboriously fashioned and your so incredible creation, with the countenance of a very great, grave gentleman who has been swindled. It is a fact from which I prefer to educe no moral.