THE SKETCH BOOK

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WHITEWASHING

By Edward Larocque Tinker

OTHER day I had occasion to visit one of the greatest of the privately owned libraries still in existence. Preliminaries had been necessary, and after a certain amount of correspondence I had been given a date by letter as far ahead as a dentist appointment. When the day finally arrived and I approached the perfectly impassive but artistically impeccable front of the edifice, a feeling of chilliness swept over me. When one of its pair of ponderous doors finally opened a crack to permit of my sliding in, the frigidity of its mausoleum-like interior almost started my teeth chattering and caused my usual cheerfulness to drain out by way of my boots.

I was left by a liveried lackey in a gorgeous but depressing room, where the rich glow of the illuminated page of a famous Bible, shining through its glass case, seemed to bring a ray of sunshine into that sombre interior. A hushed and lonely wait ensued before the lady dictator of these bookish safe deposit vaults appeared, bringing the particular manuscripts I had ventured into such polar climes to see. Simply dressed she was and with a most active mind, in which she appeared to store an efficient and amazing card catalogue of literary information.

I was on the trail of Lafcadio Hearn, and she mentioned certain unpublished letters of his that she had seen. I was all excitement, but fell into a terrible gloom when she said, "The owner of those letters said he would destroy them before he died, and — he died several years ago." I was aghast, and could only blurt out, "Why did he do it?" "Oh, they were smutty in spots!" replied this czarina of the library. "But that's nothing", she continued with perfect *sang-froid*. "I've destroyed right in this very room letters written by George Washington." I became inwardly indignant. I wanted to ask rude questions as to her qualifications for the post of expurgator to the Father of her Country. I sat on the safety valve, however, as the cool voice continued, "Oh, yes, they were smutty too, so I did not want them ever to become public and destroy the ideal of Washington that has flourished for so long. It was only a question of money. Could we afford to pay the price and then destroy our investment? We could and did." "But", I sputtered, the strain becoming too great, "do you think it's right to aid, by the suppression, nay destruction of evidence, in the manufacture of a purely apocryphal historic character?" "Yes," was the calm retort, "even if it only served to keep alive in our schools the fable of the cherry tree."

This doctrine gained the immediate

support of my wife, who is a strong believer in a sort of intellectual feudal system in which the serfs and vassals (those of lesser mentality) should be allowed only so much knowledge as would serve to make them useful in their appointed place in the mental hierachy. She seemed to feel that the setting up of such popular idols was most useful in the maintaining of proper allegiance. Consequently she advanced her heavy guns to the defense of my opponent, and I found myself outnumbered and silenced, but not convinced.

Many times since have I pondered over the ethics of this question of destroying letters and manuscripts of dead men of note. Styles in proprieties, as in dress, are continually changing. The rolled stocking and short skirts of the present generation would have scandalized the securely pantaletted susceptibilities of even the demimonde of the mid-Victorian era — and that is not so long ago. Even today among ourselves we are nowhere near unanimous in the acceptance of any particular code of the decorous. Dancing is still damnation to the strict Methodist, and facts that are superpornographic to the narrow bigot are merely commonplace, necessary, and useful to the broad minded psychoanalyst.

In view of such drastic divergences of opinion as to the proprieties of behavior, is it not a very disastrous proceeding for any one person to arrogate to himself the position of sole arbiter of the literary proprieties, especially since, in destroying what he condemns, he allows of no appeal from his judgment? May not the literary boll weevil of today, who sates his peculiar appetite for virtue by extirpating letters and manuscripts of distinguished dead authors, be in reality robbing future generations of matter that they would have considered treasure trove if they had been given the chance to assay it? No incident "points the moral and adorns the tale" more aptly than the classic one of Lady Burton. Her husband, Sir Richard, had devoted the last years of his life and the full powers of his ripe scholarship to the translation of a priceless Persian manuscript, "The Scented Garden". The work was to rival his famous translation of "The Thousand and One Nights" and was completed only a few days before his death. Lady Burton, keeping her last lonely vigil beside the corpse of her husband, discovered the manuscript and, shocked by the frankness with which the translation had rendered certain oriental theories as to love, then and there threw it into the fire. Imagine the literary loss, had that estimable lady been able to wreak her will upon "The Thousand and One Nights" also.

Not only may the unbridled self appointed censor destroy much of literary value, but he may also do grave injustice to the popularity of authors upon whose memory he wields his lethal whitewash brush. There is in all of us, to a greater or lesser degree, an inherent interest in gossip, in the slightly salacious, in learning the manner in which our neighbor has met his or her sex problem — a question common to us all. The astute publisher is thoroughly cognizant of this very human predilection, and as a consequence he often struggles manfully to have his books suppressed or put on the Index Expurgatorius, because he knows that nothing else will so boost his sales.

Lord Byron furnishes a case in point. In an article in "The Atlantic

Monthly" called "Men, Women and the Byron Complex", Katharine Fullerton Gerould has pointed out that all the commentators on Byron, with one exception, have been concerned with Byron the man, and that they have wrangled over the details of his affair with Lady This or Lady That to the exclusion of any attempt to evaluate his literary output. If this conception is correct and Byron's fame does hang, in part, upon the picturesqueness of his life and his notoriety as a pyrotechnic profligate, would it have been fair to minimize that fame by destroying all his various most indiscreet epistles to the fair sex?

If he had been able, Byron would have prevented the destruction of his memoirs by his executors, because he wished to leave a certain picture of himself for future generations. What more right had his executors to step in and alter this picture by suppressing the memoirs, than they had to disregard the wishes expressed in his will for the distribution of his property? Even in this day of confiscatory inheritance laws, an author should at least be permitted to dispose of his memory as he sees fit.

When the letters and manuscripts destroyed are those of distinguished literary men, we may lose much and grave injustice may be done to the dead; but when the letters are those of a person of historical importance — such as George Washington — yet another even more serious evil creeps in. History should be as exact a science as, say, chemistry. Of course we know it isn't, but that in no way alters the advisability of having it so; only when our historical facts are given to us with scientific accuracy and impartiality shall we be able to use them to light our future footsteps. Admitting this preamble then, is it not productive of harmful results to whitewash our leading historical personage till we can't see the color of his skin — to make of him merely a machinistic marble demigod, by deliberately destroying all evidence that he had ever been in any way human?

She who had the power of life and death in the aforementioned library clung stoutly to the opinion that the apocryphal copybook Washington, which she had done her part in preserving, had been a far greater inspiration to American school children than a truthful picture of him could ever have been. But I cannot feel that the inculcation of grossly inaccurate facts will ever be in harmony with the best theories of modern education; and as for any inspirational effect of the Washington fable upon adults — what person of any discernment likes the copybook type of anything? It always lacks the craftsman's touch, the mark of the potter's thumb — those slight inequalities that make for sympathy and beauty. Besides, would not the sight of so much superhuman virtue stuffed in the effigy of one man, discourage in a normal person any thought of imitation? The vastness of the task would certainly paralyze such a one into inanition before he had even started. On the other hand, far from being a source of discouragement, the knowledge that Washington had accomplished all that he did for his country in spite of certain very human foibles would, to my mind, make emulation seem much more feasible to the average mortal.

No, the suppression of historical data can only spell the prostitution of history; and to the phrase "historical data" a most generous inclusion must be allowed, since it should embrace

all information which may serve to make more understandable the personality or thought processes of anyone of historical importance. The substitution of a myth for a scientific fact will always be unethical, because such substitution acts as a hindrance to human progress.

Do not misunderstand me. I do not mean to say that the destroyed Washington letters should immediately have been blazoned in the Sunday Supplement under scareheads such as, "Terrible Scandal in Historical High Life", "Father of His Country Forced to Flee", etc., etc. Not at all. I do feel, however, that these letters should have been preserved in such manner as to be available to the serious student; the possessors of such documents being regarded merely as custodians for future generations, in order that those who follow us may draw their own conclusions in the light of their further knowledge or change in point of view.

In a world of so much sameness, I should hate to see our legacy of memories of the great dead pruned down to the stultifying uniformity of a soldiers' cemetery, stretching out in serried similar lines of mound and headstone, each one the monotonous counterpart of every other. If we wish to avoid this catastrophe, we must set our faces sternly against that colorless class of persons who believe that, once a man of genius dies, he should at once be canonized and clothed with all the conventional virtues — even those he most detested while alive — until the only memory of the man that is permitted to survive is molded into the form of a sort of wooden toy soldier of unbending propriety, shape and outlines so sandpapered, smoothed and blurred, that all character, interest, and life is lost.