The Nitid Crimson[1]

By DAVID C. MEARNS

Library of Congress

WITH your permission, ladies and gentlemen, I will confine your tedium to reading an exchange of correspondence between my creator and myself. It begins with a politely stern commandment: "You should join the Society of American Archivists and take an active part. That is what you are now, at least in part." It is signed "L. H. E." To that divisive edict I have proudly replied:

Dear Mr. Librarian: Guess where I am! Why, at the Officers' Mess of the United States Naval Academy dutifully addressing, in my best bicarbonate prose, a battalion of lunch-laden arkies. Am I not wonderfully obedient? Do you not long to pat my head? Is there in all your stable a more docile beast? You have decreed that henceforth I must be part-man-part-you-know-what, but have you decided which end of this newfangled centaur is which? And where have you installed the sound machine? Do I talk or do I bray? You may say that in my case the two are indistinguishable. Perhaps, but you *must* have gentler feelings for my audience.

Those poor wretches have been fraudulently brought together to listen to Vice Admiral Harry W. Hill, Superintendent of this Academy, but alas! orders being what they are, he has betaken himself to christen a vessel. The vessel is a submarine. The christening ritual will be performed, I suppose, by total immersion. He had planned to discourse, this afternoon, on his adventures with those Maryland records which Morris Radoff has hardily rescued from the Library of Congress. Shall I return the compliment by dilating upon those objects which we still hold tight in our hot little hands?

I might, of course, regale these "files upon parade" by reading selected passages from the journals of the Continental Congress at the time when that restless and mobile body occupied "two federal towns," one of which was Annapolis. Perhaps the local boys and girls would like to be reminded of the entry for Tuesday, April 24th, 1784, when under consideration was the "account of Mr. George Mann of the City of Annapolis tavern keeper for a public

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entertainment given by order of the United States in Congress assembled" to the Commander-in-Chief, a General Washington. The bill amounted to six hundred and sixty-four dollars and seventy-five ninetieths of a dollar — a whopping sum explained by cancelled lines: "the entertainment was given to a very numerous assemblage of guests was exceedingly plentiful and the provisions and liquors good in their kind."

Yet on second thought it might be improper to include such an allusion; it would almost certainly offend the militant ascetics, and might betray a lamentably cheerful extravagance on the part of our early appropriators.

No, Mr. Librarian, if in my situation, graciousness requires a prefatory salute to Annapolitan antiquaries it just might be better to mention the survival on our shelves of the original Record of the Tuesday Club and the proceedings on its tenth anniversary. It is a small folio presented to Colonel Peter Force by Mr. William S. Green. The date was May 27th, 1755, and the members foregathered at the home of their president, the Honorable Charles Cole, on North East Street. Actually, the occasion bore such striking similarities to the plight in which I now find myself that it is useless to resist a few extracts from the minutes. These would be the quotations:

After supper, which consisted of many exquisite dishes, & served in a very elegant manner as usual, the secretary being absent, William Thornton Esqr. attorney General, was appointed by his honor and the Club to deliver the anniversary speech, to which arduous and Important task, he properly prepared himself, by first rising from his seat with his usual solemn and grave air, and having put himself into a proper attitude and posture, and cleared his pipes by a little heming and spitting, he begun [sic] to deliver his oration in the following manner and form:

"Tho the making of speeches, with elegance and propriety of action & expression be a task as . . . difficult, as any within the compass of human ingenuity, yet I know not any one exercise of wit that has more pretenders than this.

"A few indeed, in other matters, will mistake their natural genius, and set up for swel[l]s, musicians, painters, punsters, boxers, fencers, dancers & so forth, and yet all the while, know nothing of the matters pretended to.

"But all degrees of men, from the King in his parliamentary robes, to the beggar in sordid rags on the high way, or the haltered rogue under the tripletree at tyburn, Lay Claim to some skill in oratory or speech making, and, in their own Judgement [sic], perhaps think they equal Cicero or Demosthenes, or some spokesmen as great, in case they never may have heard of these great men.

"And what is apt to confirm me in this notion is, that this here Club once

on a time, I hope not yet out of the memory of some here, pitched upon a certain person for their orator to whom it was naturally a pain to speak above three words in an hour, and whose favorite Phrase was, put about the bowl. . . .

"It is recorded . . . of . . . the Empress of Persia, that she commanded the Courtiers, when they spoke to her son Cyrus, to interweave their words with crimson silk, which figurative way of speaking, much practised in the east, even at this day, Imports neither more nor less, than that their speeches, when addressed to that prince, should be framed in a polite nitid stile, and abound with lively, fiery and striking expression, as Crimson silk in its texture is smooth and shining, and, in its complexion or color, lively and showy."

But at this point, Mr. Librarian, I must break off. The parallels are obvious and arresting. Were it not for fear of angering Mr. Thornton's heirs and executors I might adopt him as my ghost and, removing his warmed-up eloquence from the back of history's stove, serve it to this very convocation. But I am deterred by the realization that there are around me those fault detectives who would find it a little stuffy, a little precious, a little overdone. Again, if I were to disclose its actual identity, the predatory Radoff would surely find a way to carry it off.

For my introduction, then, I must seek another theme — must try another tack. What would you think, Mr. Librarian, of something nautical, something recalling the errant admiral? I might, to be sure, recite, with gestures and breathings, one of those dramatic battle reports from the quill of John Paul, or titillate the romantic with excerpts from his amatory correspondence. With that morocco-bound scrapbook as source it should be easy to compile the Story of the Dewey Watch Fund. There should be something exciting to exhibit from the Papers of Mahan, who was constantly under the influence of seapower, and I could filibuster for several hours by expatiating on the glorious collections of the Naval History Foundation.

Having got through the preliminaries, I could turn my attention to the archivists. Do you not agree that they are highly to be commended? Just think of it! In less than two decades they have raised their "science" to a level where now the impious favorably compares it with tea-leaf reading, spirit tapping and phrenology. They are passionately aware of Cadmus, knowing it was the inventor of the alphabet who sowed the dragon's teeth. They are the self-anointed surgeon dentists of the ages. A century ago they had no splendid organization; they had only a society. What was worse, they were deluded. Men like the Reverend William Sprague, of Albany; and Henry Stevens, of Vermont; and I. K. Tefft, of Georgia, were, I

am very much afraid, reckless preservers. One hundred years ago a rumor (subsequently and vigorously denied) was widely circulated to the effect that Queen Victoria was busily putting together a set of the signers of the Declaration of Independence.

Quite irrelevantly, I think of Saint Augustine and the hot sun, the break in the hedge and the dusty, sandy road leading to the point where a gilded discoverer looks across the sea toward Spain. On the right is an Indian mound and in the fagoted shadows below the surface of the ground lie the exposed skeletons of hundreds of old Americans. On the left, in a house of tile, stands a lady in fancy dress, a dipper in her hand. It is the Fountain of Youth.

Just why this picture keeps recurring, troubles me a little. Perhaps it is a propensity for weaving crimson silk when I should be working on red flannels. If I am to do my duty, I must manage to fasten my attention on the progress of the archivists. Technological development, I suppose, made inevitable the schism. Along came the typewriter, then the mimeograph machine, then the microfilm camera, then the photo-offset process. Records spread like a disease; they wiped out whole communities. No one was immune; everybody was perilously making them. The postal authorities, who might have regulated production by forbidding them the mails, did nothing but watch their deficits proliferate.

The schism, as I say, was inevitable. The die-hards, the fundamentalists, the conservatives who found their doctrine in manuscriptural authority, leagued together and called themselves autograph collectors. They collected everything that represented hand-strewn ink. But the new lads, the new archivists, the advocates of the higher criticism, the custodians of the nondescripts were forced to foreswear the teachings of their elders and, abandoning preservation, erect a new theology on the basis of systematic destruction.

There has been some bitterness, some bickering, some backbiting, and that is unfortunate because both denominations are composed of conscientious, devout, and zealous parishioners. Actually, in differing ways, they continue to serve the same object. Perhaps one who was only in part an archivist could reconcile the spurious conflict. Perhaps he could explain that whereas the collector indulges his scholarly taste in sound *selection*, the professional archivist is obliged to exercise considered *discrimination*. It would be necessary to admit occasional error. The archivist sometimes "retains" the wrong document; but, however abused the benefits may sometimes be, his planned "retirements" are a boon to social welfare. On his part, the collector, when surrounded by cronies, alternates what

lesser men would call his "boasting," with ruefully merry confessions of fallibility and imposition. A reunion is surely possible.

It may be necessary, for within the past year three groups, discreetly ignoring formal separation, have erased the splendid isolation which once enveloped the contestants. There has been the report of the *ad hoc* committee of the American Historical Association, the report of the Babb committee of the Association of Research Libraries, and the report of the National Historical Publications Commission. Scholarship vigorously has asserted a proprietary concern for the records of event, example, and precedent. And whether they call themselves archivists or collectors, the keepers of the past have suddenly emerged from public apathy to public interest. It is high time. It is time for action and for confidence.

Especially is it a time for confidence. So much, Mr. Librarian, so very much has been accomplished. We have those fine surveys, those detailed inventories, those extensive guides. We have licked, or are in course of licking, the problems of custody, of restoration, of arrangement. We have developed methods and proved their efficacy in experience. We have assembled vast collections. We have talked of a national register and have promised ourselves that it should come to being. There remain two ponderous obstacles to overcome.

The first is the persistent obstacle of literary property rights in unpublished papers. Those rights are almost never asserted except in court reports and on the statute books. They are, in their present form, frequently an impediment to research, a restraint to learning, a wanton squanderer of intellectual power. They are usually ridiculous and, being ridiculous, are rather generally ignored. As a matter of fact, they are so universally nullified as ordinarily to be unknown. But there they are, like dodoes under glass in the dark corner of a museum looking sinisterly down on us. They haunt our dreams and disturb our labors. Most of us, under pressure, would concede some virtue in withholding from general use private papers of recent origin. Considerations, entirely *valid*, like the risks of libel, or gratuitous offence, or invasion of privacy would lend cogency to the argument. We would all agree that under certain conditions their publication might deprive their authors of financial increment. But when they have been abandoned for more than fifty years, when the sensitive feelings of their contrivers have vanished from the earth, when their monetary value has diminished to an indeterminate fraction of a scholar's public-spirited and public-purposed summary while their importance is decisive to his exposition of reality, then they

had best be dedicated to the people's cause. But casual abridgment, however justified, is an untidy answer to the problem. It is also unwise. The straight, easy, unequivocal path leads to correctives at law. Any change, however, must be made without prejudice to the firm protection of those individual prerogatives and freedoms for which our nation strives. The remedy, I might respectfully suggest, is not without some selfish urgency, for, so long as the present situation prevails, archives and archivists are threatened with creeping paralysis and gradual dissolution.

But we archivists (if, just this once, I may count myself among them) are blessed with stout allies. They are the warranty of our existence. They are those we serve. They will support us, uphold us, strengthen us so long as we are useful to them. We must not be unmindful of their expectations. At the same time we may, I believe, fairly insist upon their cooperation. They look to us to provide them with facilities which ensure collections capable of fullest exploitation. Are we doing that now? I am not so sure. There are moments of discouragement and skepticism when our preoccupation with the mere physical handling and storage of refractory masses of material may deflect us from our principal design. We have to all intents and purposes wilfully discarded the old-fashioned drudgery of preparing indexes. We condone our dereliction by maintaining that the records are too voluminous, that the costs are too exorbitant, that the substitute contraptions are satisfactory because they are simple. These apologies present a pleasant plausibility. But here among ourselves, talking shop, we should indulge a little candor. We know that there are no substitutes for indexes and we know that it is our business to procure them. It will be objected that we will never have the money to pay the staff to compile the entries. I grant you that we cannot foresee the day when we can subject *all* of our resources to bibliographical control, but we must recommence on limited scale the making of the keys. If we do not, our patrons and our anarchic charges will fall upon us and devour us. Surely we who lean so blithely and so heavily on our judgment in every other activity can depend upon it to arrive at proper choices. And our friends could help us, if they would.

Heads of university departments, for example, might be persuaded to accept, from candidates for masters' degrees, indexes in lieu of theses. A competent calendar, on the other hand, might be construed as representing the original research implicit in a doctoral dissertation. When accompanied by historical and expository introductions, these products of graduate study would be works dedi-

cated to the entire scholarly community, and the compilers would acquire for themselves as intensive and determinable specializations as they could derive from the pursuit of other assignments.

These, Mr. Librarian, are some of the ideas which I would like to mention to the archivists, and there is one further, perhaps superfluous and therefore impertinent observation that I feel compelled to make: they must not permit professionalism to absorb them. They must summon all their resolution steadfastly to remain the eager amateurs. For the picture of that Florida grove is back again and the archivists are going down that dusty, sandy road. Are they turning to the right, and, jumping from the platform, crying to the ancient bones, "move over, make room for us!" No, they are going for the lady with the dipper and the zestful water. That they always will, your petitioner forever prays.