

GEORGE'S TEETH

By Earl Lewin

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

On May 13, 1773 George Washington recorded in his diary that he, his stepson Jackie and Maryland Governor Eden visited the governor's brother aboard his ship the Annapolis in Chestertown. That evening they dined with Thomas Ringgold II and his wife Mary at the Ringgold's home at 106 Water Street, Chestertown, Maryland. It is also fact that Thomas Smythe III, was a neighbor at Whitehall, 101 Water Street with his second wife Margaret and many children, one being an eighteen year old son named Richard born in 1755. At this point in the following script, fact turns to fiction. The neighbor, Bains Huffington, and his house on Water Street exist only in the imagination. The reception and party prior to the dinner at the Ringgold's that Mr. Huffington's daughter Becky is so anxious to be invited to is pure fabrication.

The facts discussed by Bains Huffington and Richard Smythe about George Washington's personal nature and history are taken from biographies and articles published about the great man; articles pointing out that George was quite human, not particularly comfortable in social settings and not someone you want to cross. He was ambitious and driven to gain social prominence not having a formal education nor a background consistent with the expectations of English nobility. He was fearless and seemed impervious to harm in battle but his inability to gain a commission as a British officer drove him to retire from the British military. He turned his ambition toward politics. Those who really knew him were fiercely loyal and full of admiration. In 1773 when this play takes place, he was a prominent member of the Virginia Convention. Revolution was in the air but hope remained that a peaceful settlement could be arranged with Britain. The Boston Tea Party was not to occur until the following year.

Book Ref:

"Washington, A Life" by Ron Chernow (2010)

"An Imperfect God. George Washington His Slaves and the Creation of America" by Henry Weinck (2003)

"Trumpington. A Legacy of Land on the Chesapeake Bay" by Jenifer Grindle Dolde (2006)

"Washington in Kent County", by Benjamin G. Kohl, (2009)

"A Traveling George" By Anne McNulty

Inci"dentally", Georges teeth were not made of wood. Current analysis of his dentures (There were four sets.) by researchers at the Smithsonian Dental Museum in Baltimore just recently learned that they were made of gold, ivory, lead and human and animal teeth. He was very self conscious of his teeth and seldom smiled.

CAST

BAINS HUFFINGTON. Wealthy and confident Chestertown merchant. Middle aged. Puts forth a gruff exterior but has a sense of humor. Fond of verbal kidding. Does not like all the fuss about George Washington and is a tinge jealous of the fame and attention that George gets.

WIFE (MRS. HUFFINGTON). A charming and polished women who is about 5 years younger than her husband. She is quite up to matching her husbands verbal jesting.

BECKY. The seventeen year old daughter of the Huffingtons. A perk and “modern” teenager.

RICHARD SMYTHE. An eighteen year old son of Thomas Smythe III of 101 Water Street, Chestertown, MD. Shy until it comes to his political beliefs.

MISSY. The Huffington’s parlor maid. She is formal but comfortable with her place in the Huffington household.

SETTING

The scene is the parlor of wealthy Chestertown merchant Bains Huffington. There is a door up left which leads off to the entry hall and the front door which are off stage. There is a door stage left which leads to the dinning room, kitchen and the back stairs, all off stage. There are a sofa and an upholstered chair and any other furniture pieces that might be used to decorate the set for the period which is 1773.

GEORGE'S TEETH in one act.

(Bains Huffington sits in an overstuffed chair reading a book. His wife enters from stage right.)

WIFE

Sir, you haven't forgotten your daughter's friend?

BAINS

(Keeps reading)

No I have not. But I think she has.

WIFE

Don't you think you should place your book down and put your jacket on?

BAINS

You think I am not dressed properly for that young whelp?

WIFE

He is not a whelp. Richard Smythe is a fine young man and I think he is more than casually interested in your daughter. You must take this opportunity to get to know him. One of these days one of her gentlemen callers will be asking for her hand in marriage.

BAINS

She's too young.

WIFE

She's eighteen years old I was seventeen when you married me. If you have your way she will end up an old maid. Do you want that?

BAINS

If she'll take care of me in my dotage.

WIFE

Keep that attitude and nobody is going to take care of you in your dotage.

BAINS

Not even you my sweet.

WIFE

Not even me. Now put your book down and make yourself presentable.

WIFE

(He does as he is told. She pats down his coat collar.)

There. You are a fine figure of a man Mr. Huffington.

BAINS

Where is my daughter anyway? How long am I going to have to chat with this fellow?
What can I talk to him about?

(SOUND: The front door opens and closes off stage)

WIFE

I'm sure you'll find something. She's with Julia. They are helping Mrs. Ringgold with some flowers for the reception tonight.

BECKY

(Bursting in from the hall. Coming from outside.)
Sorry I'm late. Richard hasn't been and gone has he?

WIFE

He is not due for five minutes

BECKY

He's not very anxious. He should have been early if he is really interested. I hope he's coming to ask if he can escort me to the reception tonight. And, Pappa, say yes.

BAINS

(correcting her)
Father. Don't use common language?

BECKY

(Paying no attention to him)
I don't want to go by myself. I will if I have to. Mrs. Ringgold invited me.

WIFE

Lucky you. I didn't know children were invited.

BAINS

Have I said you could go?

BECKY

(Totally oblivious to her father)
Mother I am not a child. I can't wait to meet Colonel Washington

BAINS

I've heard he isn't very pleasant so don't be disappointed.

WIFE

We know you don't like him father. I've heard he's quite pleasant.

BAINS

To women; and he's not from the best of families. He's uneducated and awkward socially.

BECKY

That is very unfair. You've never met him.

BAINS

And I have no desire to.

BECKY

I think you are jealous of all the attention and fame. I saw him and Governor Eden on the deck of the Annapolis. Oh Mother, he is so tall and handsome.

WIFE

You better concentrate on young Richard Smythe or he will feel the same way about Colonel Washington as your father.

BECKY

Oh Richard's just a boy. Colonel Washington is so . . .

BAINS

Full of himself.

BECKY

Poppa.!

BAINS

(Correcting her.)

Father.

BECKY

Colonel Washington is at Worrell's Tavern having a drink. He's with his son Jackie and the governor. He's so elegant. Julia and I followed them up Cannon Street but we didn't let them see us.

BAINS

They'll think you're a couple of British spies. What's he doing in Chestertown anyway?

WIFE

He's taking his son to matriculate at Kings College in New York. They stopped here because Governor Eden's brother's ship is in port.

BAINS

It's not his son. It's his step son. Jackie belongs to Martha Custis. So does all his money.

BECKY

We know that “father”. It’s going to be a grand evening. Mrs. Ringgold is having a string quartet. I’ve heard he loves to dance. I hope he asks me.

BAINS

If he has the gall to ask, you will politely refuse. He’s more than twice your age, and he’s a little too fond of women.

BECKY

(To her mother.)

What are you going to wear?

WIFE

I’m still trying to convince your father to go. You know his politics.

BAINS

He’s with that bunch from Virginia preaching revolution.

BECKY

Father. You have to go. It is the social event of the season. Colonel Washington is so imposing. He’s over six feet tall. They say when he walks into a room everything stops. He’s so handsome.

BAINS

He has wooden teeth.

BECKY

Father!

BAINS

He does. I heard it from an impeccable source. Wooden teeth. Kiss a man like that and you’ll get splinters in your lips.

WIFE

Don’t listen to your father. I am surprised the Ringgolds could make this happen with such little advance notice. Come on, we must get you ready for your guest. We can talk about the party later.

BECKY

Father. What are you going to talk about to Richard? Please don’t embarrass me.

BAINS

I will talk to him about whatever I damn well please.

WIFE

Watch your language "Father". Come Becky. Your father is in control of the situation.

(She gives him a "not really" look. They start toward the hall when there is a knock at the exterior door.)

BECKY

It must be Richard. He can't see me like this.

BAINS

Like what? You look fine.

WIFE

She has to freshen herself up. We'll go through the kitchen and use the back stairway. Missy can show him in. Behave yourself.

BAINS

How did I get involved in this?

WIFE

I'm sure you will handle everything with aplomb.

BECKY

I wish I had your confidence.

(She gives him an impertinent smile as they exit stage left)

(Missy enters from the hall with a young man trailing her. He stands just visible in the doorway as she introduces him.)

MISSY

Mister Richard Smythe wishing your permission to call on Miss Becky, sir

BAINS

(Holding the young man in his glance.)

Tell him that he may come in, Missy.

MISSY

Yes sir. You may come in sir. (They do a dance at the door; her trying to leave, him trying to come in. She finally gets past him. He is still standing in the doorway.)

BAINS

Are you stuck to the floor, Mr. Smythe?

RICHARD

No sir.

BAINS

Then please come in and take a seat so I can sit down.
(They sit across from one another.)

RICHARD

(He gets settled in a chair.)
It is a very pleasant day for this time of year, sir.

BAINS

Clearly you are alert to have noticed that.

RICHARD

Have you heard that Colonel Washington is passing through Chestertown on his way to New York today?

BAINS

Not the latest news but I understand he is.

RICHARD

The Ringgolds' reception in honor of his visit, it is said, will be the social event of the season.

BAINS

Is it now? All this fuss over a retired soldier. He's not from our sort of people you know. He has no formal education though both of his half brothers were well educated on the continent. Two half brothers. I suppose that should equal one whole brother, but George was not whole enough to be educated by his own family. So he can't be all that important now can he?

RICHARD

Colonel Washington is very intelligent sir, and quite imposing;

BAINS

You've met him then?

RICHARD

Yes sir, a very striking man sir. My father had some business with Captain Eden aboard the Annapolis this morning. He let me come along and we met Colonel Washington.

BAINS

Hmm. I wonder, when you met him . . . did he smile?

RICHARD

He has a very regal but serious demeanor. He is quite reserved. No sir, now that you mention it, I never saw him smile.

BAINS

I'm not surprised. He has wooden teeth.

RICHARD

What?

BAINS

Wooden teeth, boy, the man has wooden teeth.

RICHARD

Egad.

BAINS

I wonder if he fell overboard if that would help him float.

RICHARD

I should think it would be a negligible amount of wood, sir.

BAINS

If there were a fire on deck, would his mouth be the first thing to go up in flames?

RICHARD

I should think if he kept his lips clamped shut . . .

BAINS

I wonder if they are made from the Cherry tree he supposedly axed. This gives new meaning to the fact that teeth have roots.

RICHARD

This seems rather irreverent sir, considering his position. Virginia parliament and all, sir.

BAINS

A politician with nothing but wooden teeth to lie through. It seems there is little good that can be said about him.

RICHARD

Much good is said of his honor and courage. He faced the French and Indians with General Braddock. When the general was fatally wounded, Washington didn't leave him for a minute. Everybody else ran. Washington took four bullets through his clothing.

BAINS

Sounds like he's fool hearty to me Anyway that's ancient history. What else could he expect going out into the wilderness and fighting savages and Frenchmen.. And Good luck for George Washington. He got a promotion out of that. They should have let the Indians have the Ohio Territory I say. It'd just a useless wilderness. And why are he and his friends making all this fuss about King George. Without British rule we won't survive. Who will protect the colonies if we haven't the British army?

RICHARD

Begging your pardon sir, but why should we be ruled by a king who lives on another continent. We can take care of ourselves. Our militias will protect us.

BAINS

Untrained farmers with guns? That's horrofyng. Nobody will be safe. People like Washington, and you obviously, are going to make us lose everything we have worked for. Those gentlemen from Virginia are stirring up a hornet's nest that's going to turn around and sting the lot of them. All this talk of independence is hogwash. Long live the King I say and you better say it too when you are sitting in my parlor

RICHARD

I am sorry sir for being outspoken. I feel strongly about our country's future. Respectfully sir, I sincerely hope that you will not express your views in Colonel Washington's presence, I hear he does not like to be opposed and he can be quite offended by that.

BAINS

Well young man, have you come here to lecture me? My family does quite well in that regard. I don't need some young ...

RICHARD

I apologize sir, for my impertinence. I did not mean to offend you. I did not come here to discuss politics and I sincerely hope that my observations about our prominent visitor will not color your response to my request concerning you daughter who I am sure we both agree is of far more importance than the politics of the day.

BAINS

My daughter is of great importance to me. Exactly what is your interest in my daughter?

RICHARD

Well sir, I am hoping that she will go with me to the Ringgold's this evening to attend the reception.

BAINS

That's all?

RICHARD

I don't follow you, sir.

BAINS

You didn't come here to ask for her hand in marriage or something?

RICHARD

That hadn't crossed my mind sir. Just to go to a dance, sir. With your permission of course. That's all.

BAINS

That's a relief.

RICHARD

And I sincerely hope that you and Mrs. Huffington will be in attendance as I know that my parents certainly intend to be there.

BAINS

Your father? I thought he had much the same opinion as myself about Colonel Washington's politics.

RICHARD

My father is of the opinion that Colonel Washington wields a great deal of influence. He is friends with some of the most powerful men in America.

BAINS

Influence? The British Army wouldn't even offer him a commission. I hear he practically begged for it. They obviously did not consider him such an influential gentleman. I don't know what the Ringgolds are making all the fuss is about.

RICHARD

He is a fine man sir, Everyone who knows him admires him greatly. You would be pleased to meet him. He is quite dignified and every bit the gentleman. I sincerely hope that you will attend this evening.

BECKY

(Standing in the doorway to the main hall. Looking her best.)

I believe that he has already been invited.

RICHARD

Becky. You look . . . you look . . . ;

BAINS

She looks?

BECKY

(Attempting to get rid of her father.)
 Father, Mother wishes to speak with you.

BAINS

What about?

(Becky steps into the room and gives him a get lost stare.)
 Oh yes, of course. Excuse me. It has been quite . . . unusual speaking with you,

RICHARD

I hope to see you this evening sir.

BAINS

Yes. We'll see.
 (He leaves by the front hall.)

RICHARD

Becky, you look . . .

BECKY

You already told me that. Please, Richard, do sit down. You appear to be paralyzed. My father has this effect on people. I've arrived just in time to save you.

RICHARD

Thank God.
 (He sits on the settee.)
 You look beautiful.

BECKY

Thank you.
 (She sits next to him.)

RICHARD

Your father doesn't seem to like Colonel Washington.

BECKY

Don't mind him. He's jealous.

RICHARD

Jealous? Why.

BECKY

Because Colonel Washington is tall, elegant, handsome, famous, courageous and rich. .
 And my father is, well, just rich.

RICHARD

He seems preoccupied with Colonel Washington's teeth. He thinks they are wooden.

BECKY

Do you think they are?

RICHARD

I would never ask Colonel Washington. He has a mean temper.

BECKY

Have you seen first hand?

RICHARD

His teeth?

BECKY

His temper.

RICHARD

Oh, no. My father told me. He saw someone criticize him and warned me never to do that. The Colonel is very smart and strong willed. He will not allow his opinion or character to be questioned.

BECKY

I think perhaps I should discourage my father from attending the reception tonight. One never knows what he is going to say. He could cause a riot. He'll probably ask to see Colonel Washington's teeth.

RICHARD

I was sure your parents had been invited. My parents also received a hand written note from Colonel Washington hoping to see them tonight. He is very astute politically and probably sent one to all the prominent merchants in town.

BECKY

I hope you didn't mention that to my father.

RICHARD

Oh no. He didn't get one? Thank God I only mentioned this to you. What a blunder that would have been. I should not even have asked if they were attending. I just assumed they had been asked.

BECKY

Mr. Ringgold invited them but my father will be furious if he finds that Colonel Washington does not consider him a prominent merchant in Chestertown. And I must say, forget about his teeth, that is something I myself take umbrage to. My father is as important in this town as anyone. (CONTINUED)

BECKY (CONT.)

More even. Maybe I should encourage them not to attend this evening. That's insulting. Maybe I won't even go myself . . . if I have to go by myself.

RICHARD

Oh! That's why I am here. All this talk about George Washington has boggled my mind. Please Becky, forgive me. I came to ask if you would do me the honor of accompanying me to the reception this evening. I hope you will.

BECKY

Did you ask my father?

RICHARD

I did.

BECKY

Did he give his consent?

RICHARD

I'm not sure. I think so

BECKY

Well did he or didn't he?

RICHARD

He said "That's a relief." I thought that was strange.

BECKY

My father is strange. We will take that as a yes if you are asking me.

RICHARD

I am. Will you come with me?

BECKY

Yes.

RICHARD

May I stop by for you at 5:30?

BECKY

You may.

(She holds her hand out. RICHARD doesn't know whether to kiss it or shake it.)

(Mrs. Huffington enters from the front hall, right.)

WIFE

Becky, it is time for your visitor to leave.

RICHARD

Yes mam, I was just leaving. I hope I will see you this evening.
(RICHARD nods to her and exits right.)

MISSY

(Off stage right we hear MISSY say)
Have a good day sir.

(SOUND: The front door opens and closes.)

BECKY

Mother, I am really upset.

WIFE

Didn't Richard ask you?

BECKY

Of course he did and I said yes. That's not the problem. If father learns about this he will be irate.

WIFE

He told me he gave his permission.

BECKY

He did. That's not what I'm talking about.

WIFE

You confuse me. What are you talking about?

BECKY

Richard said that all of the prominent merchants received a hand written letter from Colonel Washington telling them he looks forward to seeing them at the reception this evening.

WIFE

This is a disaster. Your father must never learn of it.

(SOUND: As the dialogue continues there is a knock at the front door and Missy opens the door off stage.)

BECKY

How will we keep it from him? Even if he doesn't hear it tonight he and his friends will talk over a beer at Worrell's Tavern. He's bound to find out.

MISSY

(Off stage voice.)

Thank you kindly Sam. I'll see he gets this.

WIFE

I think we'd best not go to the reception. If he learns of it there we will have a terrible scandal on our hands. He will not let it go unnoticed. There will be a horrendous fight with Colonel Washington and Colonel Washington will undoubtedly win. We'll be disgraced. Your father will be . . .

MISSY

Excuse me for interrupting, mam, but Sam from the Annapolis crew just brought this letter for Mr. Huffington. I told him I would make sure he got it right away.

WIFE

Let me see that, Missy, and ask Mr. Huffington to come down.
(She takes the letter and examines the envelope.)

BECKY

Do you think . . .?

WIFE

I certainly hope so.

BECKY

Who else from the Annapolis would send a letter?

WIFE

I can't think of any reason. I certainly hope . . .

BECKY

(Grabbing the letter.)

Let's open it.

WIFE

(Grabbing it back.)

Becky, don't you dare. This is addressed to your father.

BAINS

(Entering from the hall, right.)

Do you intend to pester me all day? Every time I turn a page you interrupt me. I will never finish my book.

WIFE

Sorry to be a nuisance, but this letter came for you from the deck of the Annapolis just now

BAINS

(All the time he is opening the letter.)

What for? Couldn't it wait? I don't owe them any money. I gave them a check for our last cargo two weeks ago. Damn what are they after now. I keep my bills paid. You know I do. They probably can't keep their records straight. I have half a notion to go up there right now and give Captain Eden a piece of my mind. I don't give a damn if George Washington is on board.

(He stands and reads as the women hold their breath.)

Well !!! Well well !!!

WIFE

What is it? Are they sending you to debtor's prison?

BAINS

It's a letter from George Washington. In his own hand it would appear. He looks forward to meeting "me and my wife and wishes to have that honor this evening at the Ringgold's reception. Colonel George Washington."

WIFE

(With a conspiratorial glance at Becky.)

This is indeed a surprise. Does this mean we might attend the reception this evening? It seems it would be a direct insult to Colonel Washington if you should refuse his kind overture.

BAINS

This certainly throws a different light on the social aspect of the man's character. I mean that he would single us out. I am glad that he recognizes our position in Chestertown society. He is obviously a more refined and intelligent gentleman than I had previously believed.

WIFE

You are very important in this town, Mr. Huffington

BECKY

You are the most important man in this town, Poppa.

BAINS

Father. A letter to me from the great man.

WIFE

Then will we be going to the reception?

BAINS

In his own handwriting. Imagine. Do you have a proper gown to wear? Is my formal attire cleaned and pressed?

WIFE

Everything is at the ready, Mr. Huffington.

BECKY

Do say you'll go Pop . . . pa . . . Father . . . I am sure that Richard is looking forward to seeing you again.

BAINS

Do you think so? We did have a rather spirited discussion.

WIFE

He looked very pale when he left.

BECKY

Father please say that you will go. It will mean so much to mother. And please promise you will be friendly and not say one word about politics. I am sure Colonel Washington is the great man that everyone says he is.

BAINS

(Looking at the letter)

Looking forward to meeting me. Hmm. I will certainly consider it. I suppose he isn't such a bad sort after all . . . even if he does have wooden teeth.

CURTAIN