THIRD SECTION

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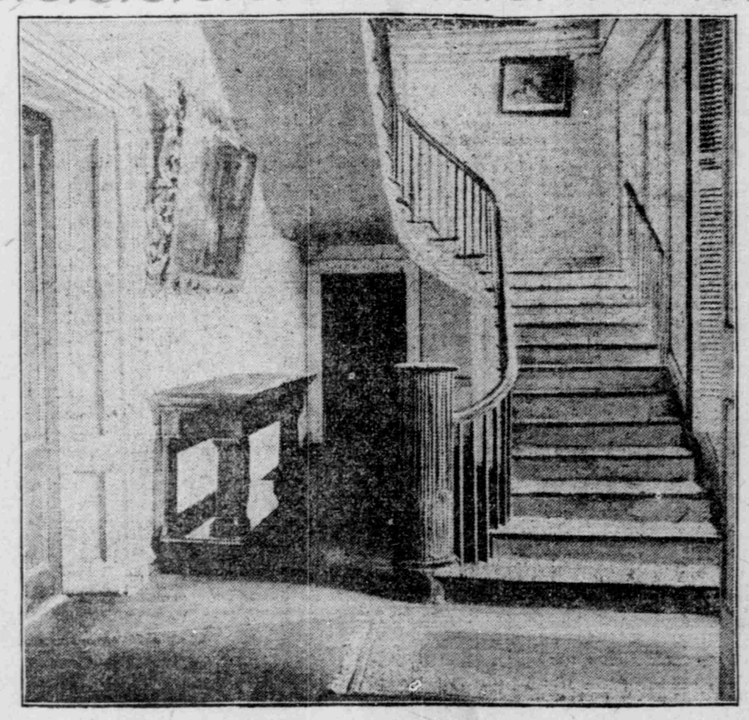
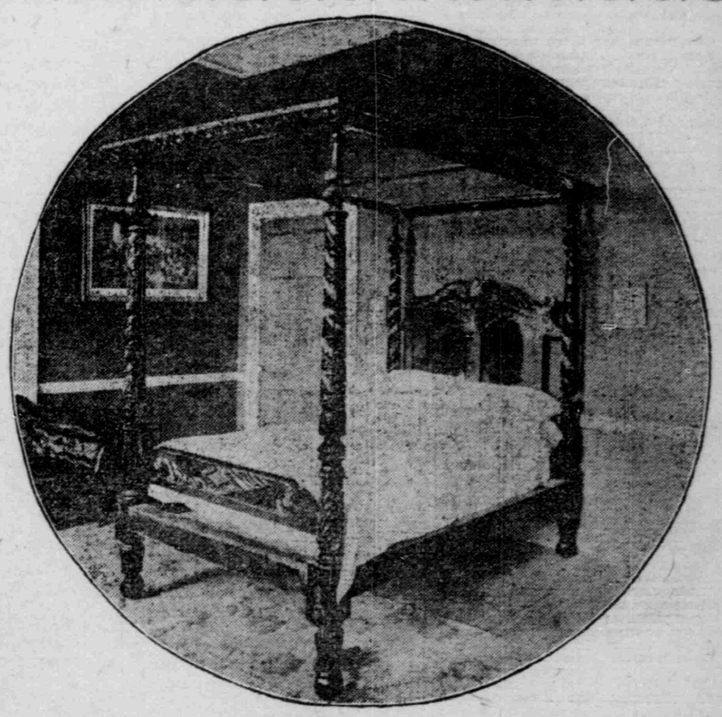
ROMANCE OF AN OLD COLONIAL MANSION

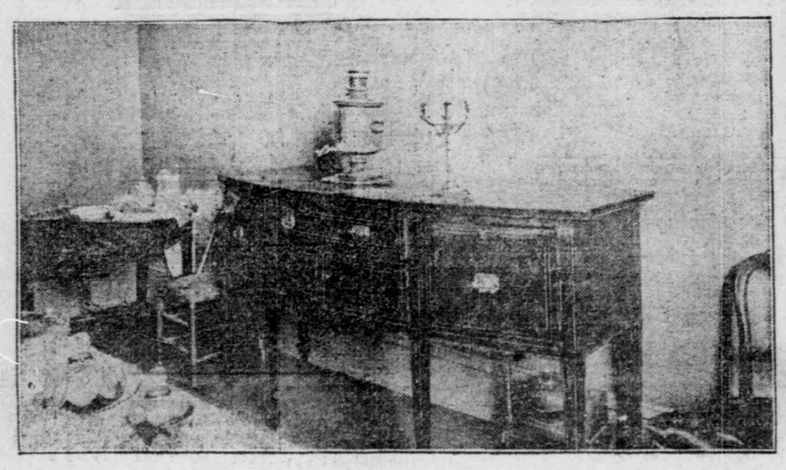
Calvert House From the Northwest.



The Hall and Stairway.



The Old Bed.



The Colonial Buffet.

South Front of the Mansion.

HENRY J. STIER was a banker in Antwerp. In wealth and enterprise he was prominent among the men who maintained the reputation that city on the Scheldt had enjoyed for centuries of being one of the financial centers of the world. He was a man of culture and refinement. His magnificent country home was adorned with valuable treasures of art, including a large collection of paintings by Reubens, Van Dyck, and other Flemish and Dutch masters.

With an interesting and affectionate family life seemed pleasant to him. But there came a day when political troubles gathered around him. The exact nature of these no one knows, but the tradition to his descendants in this country indicate a cause in the condition of affairs consequent upon the French revolution. However this may be, he deemed it wise to bring his paintings and such other works of art as might be considered cash-producing assets and his family to America, the only peaceful retreat in the civilized world. He chose for his abode the dale between the rivers, a mile above the historic village of Bladensburg, and built a model of his home near Antwerp.

Original Construction of Mansion.

The date of the construction of Stier's house, now known as the Calvert mansion, cannot be definitely ascertained. It has been more than once stated in print that the date was about the middle of the eighteenth century, and that the land upon which it stands was acquired by a grant from George III. This statement has no more foundation in fact than has the fanciful assertion that the bricks in its walls were made in England and hauled in ox-carts from St. Mary's, the first capital of the province of Maryland.

Another impossible tradition, but one entirely outside of the family interested, is that Washington was ever a visitor to the mansion. General and Mrs. Washington were not infrequent visitors to Mount Airy, the home of the Calverts, in the main line of descent from Lord Baltimore. Washington was a stanch friend of Benedict Calvert, son of the sixth lord, whose daughter Eleanor, in 1774, married John Parke Custis, the father of George Washington Parke Custis, and grandfather of Mrs. Robert E. Lee.

Calvert mansion was built certainly not later than 1805, possibly as early as 1792, most probably about 1801. It is questionable if a man of Stier's opportunities and associations in selecting a home would have avoided the vicinity of New York or Philadelphia unless the National Capital, located at Washington in 1791, had been the attraction.

Romance Enters Upon the Scene.

As soon as Stier considered it prudent he returned to Antwerp to look after his affairs. When he came back he found that his daughter Rosalie Eugenie had married George Calvert. Local history is silent as to whether or not the absence of the father rendered easier the realization of the lovers' hopes. However this may have been, Calvert proved himself an acceptable son-in-law to the Belgian banker. He was rich, intellectual, educated, handsome of face and form. Withal he was intensely practical. Years afterward, when Stier found it safer to return with his family to his European home he gave Calvert his choice between the pictures and the real estate, the latter is reported to have said: "Damn your daubs I'll take the land."

George Calvert was ten years older than Rosalie Stier. The date of their marriage is not recorded. Their oldest son, Charles Benedict Calvert, represented his native district in the Thirty-seventh Congress, and Lanman's Biographical Annals gives the date of his birth as August 24, 1808. Another son, George H. Calvert, was once mayor of Newport, R. I., and an author of some reputation. One of his daughters was the mother of Bernard Carter, a very prominent lawyer of Baltimore. When he came into possession of the mansion the number of acres belonging to it was not very large. He soon acquired several thousand acres of contiguous territory and converted them into a magnificent plantation. He was what would now be called a model farmer. He was the promoter and principal owner of the Washington and Baltimore Turnpike. It was never a paying concern, and Calvert sunk $100,000 in the enterprise.

The hospitality of Calvert mansion conformed to the old ideas. Visiting was done by means of the stately coach with outriders in livery and servants with great wagons of baggage, for seldom was the stay limited to a day or two. For the accommodation of these and of the neighboring fox hunting gentry, his stable contained more than a hundred stalls. A few years ago, in remodeling the vault adjoining the library, which had been used for the storing of silverware and other valuables, a number of interesting documents and papers were found, among them wine bills for almost fabulous sums, showing that all the care for guests had not been lavished upon their horses and retinues. One of these papers was a receipted bill of a New York dry goods firm for $1,876.56, dated 1831. Another was a parchment signed by King George III, and dated 1727, appointing Benedict Leonard Calvert, fifth Lord Baltimore (and great-grandfather of George Calvert), collector of internal revenue for Prince George county.

Benedict, the son of the sixth George, was the youngest and favorite son of Lord Baltimore, and Elizabeth, the only daughter of Charles Calvert, who was the royal governor of Maryland from 1720 to 1727. Benedict was the last collector of his majesty's customs for the port of Annapolis. He had taken an oath to support the British government, and he remained faithful to his obligation. His manor in Anne Arundel county, consisting of 15,000 acres, was confiscated, and he made Mount Airy his permanent home, his winter home having been at Annapolis. Dying in 1788 he left Mount Airy to his oldest son, Edward Henry, with a proviso that it should go to George in the event of the recovery of the confiscated manor. Suit was instituted for its recovery, but the Legislature passed a law which made recovery in such cases impossible. George, however, got 2,000 or more acres of the Mount Airy estate.

Caroline Calvert, sister to Benedict, was the wife of Sir Robert Eden, who was the last royal governor of Maryland, serving from 1769 to 1776. He was reputed one of the handsomest and most accomplished men of his day. An incident in his history shows how much alike to the humor of today was that of 120 years ago. Being nursed through a long spell of sickness at Mount Airy, and served with chicken broth, broiled chicken, toasted chicken, and every other form of chicken thought to be suitable for convalescents, usque ad nauseam, he begged for a change of diet, because he could feel the pin feathers coming through his flesh.

It is unknown whether Stier or his son-in-law, Calvert, gave the name Riversdale to the mansion and its grounds. The name is both pretty and appropriate. Between the Eastern and Northwestern Branches of the Potomac lies the beautiful dale where for three generations lived the younger branch of a family which first instituted religious toleration in the New World.

The house contains forty rooms, high and spacious, with finishings as fine as money could buy. In many of them the frescoed ceilings and beautifully carved woodwork show a good state of preservation. The walls of the west drawing-room were originally covered with mirrors. The marble mantlepiece in this room, said to be the finest in workmanship and quality that ever came to this country, was sold some years ago for $5,000. The east drawing-room was also splendidly finished. On the walls and extending entirely around the large room was painted in water colors the scene of a fox chase. Unfortunately this fine work of art was painted over in recent years. Between the two drawing-rooms is the large ballroom, originally finished in keeping with the grandeur of the general design.

On the second story and near the center of the building is "Henry Clay's room." Until very recent years the furniture in this room was left as last used by the Great Commoner. The only remnant now seen about the building is a bed in another room and the wardrobe of solid mahogany, lined with cedar and weighing nearly half a ton, standing in the hall near the head of the main stairway. George Calvert and his son, Charles Benedict, were great admirers of Henry Clay, who for more than thirty years spent most of his spare time during the sessions of Congress at the mansion. He prepared many of his speeches here, and, it is said, wrote the draft of the Missouri Compromise of 1820. A short distance south of the house is an artificial lake fed by two vigorous springs, near the center of which is a diminutive island covered with trees. In Clay's time a handsome footbridge afforded access to the island and a beautiful summer house thereon was one of his favorite spots.

Daniel Webster was a frequent and welcome visitor to the mansion, as was John J. Crittenden, of Kentucky, who was elected to the United States Senate five times between 1817 and 1855, governor of his State in 1848, appointed Attorney General of the United States in 1841 and 1850, and who finished his life as a member of the same Congress in which sat his friend, Charles Benedict Calvert. Mrs. Crittenden, a woman of delightful social qualities, frequently accompanied her distinguished husband to Riverdale.

Contrary to current tradition, Lafayette was never a guest at the mansion. On the occasion of his second visit to America he stopped at Rossburg, the roadhouse of Riversdale plantation, now a part of the experiment station of Maryland Agricultural College. Hearing of it, George Calvert invited the marquis to the mansion, but he wrote in reply that he was in a great hurry to reach Mount Vernon and that he had only stopped for a short rest.

In 1814 some friends of George Calvert residing in Rome presented him with a bell for the cupola of his mansion, and, Anglican as he was, he desired that it should be especially blessed by Pope Pius VII. His wishes were complied with. This bell occupied its appointed place until a few years ago, when the present owner of the property, Mrs. Gordon, of Washington, presented it to Georgetown University.

The Cannon on the Porch.

On the left of the north porch, which is surmounted by columns cut for the United States Capitol, but rejected because too small, lies an old iron cannon. The rust has eaten a large hole to the bore on the right side near the muzzle, and the whole piece shows the effect of the corroding hand of time. Tradition says that years ago the Jesuit Fathers of St. Mary's county raised two pieces from the wreck of a British vessel, presented one to George Calvert and the other to the statehouse at Annapolis; that they were brought over by the first settlers, and that they were used against Nathaniel Bacon, that sturdy rebel of Virginia, who, just a hundred years before our Declaration of Independence was promulgated, made wretched the last year of the life of that old tyrant, Gov. Sir William Berkeley.

The tombs of George Calvert and his wife are in the family burying ground on a gentle slope a short distance west of the railroad tracks. The inscriptions are:

Here Lies the Body
of
GEORGE CALVERT, Esquire,
Of Riversdale,
Youngest Son
of Benedict Calvert,
Of Mount Airy, Prince George's County,
Maryland,
And Grandson
Of Charles Calvert, Sixth Lord Baltimore,
Who Died
January 28, 1838,
Aged 70.

Here Rests the Body of
ROSALIE EUGENIA CALVERT,
Wife of George Calvert and Daughter of
Henry J. Stier, Esquire, of Antwerp,
Who Died March 13, 1821, Aged 43.

May she be numbered among the children of
God, and her lot be among the saints.

We see the hand we worship and adore,
And justify the disposing power.

Let me die the death of the righteous,
And my latter end be like His.

Death ends our woe,
And puts a period to the ills of life.

On the death of his father, Charles Benedict Calvert came into the possession of the mansion and 1,900 acres of the land. Like his father, he was a progressive and energetic farmer. He was a very successful raiser of fine stock, in which he took great interest and pleasure. He was one of the founders of the Maryland Agricultural College, its largest stockholder, and its first president. He was for many years president of the Maryland Agricultural Society, also of the Prince George County Society, and vice president of the United States Agricultural Society. He was several times elected to the Legislature, and in 1860 to the lower house of Congress. Serving through the three sessions of that stormy Congress, he never abated his interest in behalf of agriculture. He drafted the bill that changed the Department of Agriculture from a little bureau of the Interior Department into a separate institution. He died May 14, 1864.

THE DECLINE OF THE CONSCIENCE FUND

"I AM not inclined to think that that busy little thing men call conscience is as busy as he used to be," said a prominent official of the Treasury recently. "The truth is so far as the 'conscience fund' of this department is concerned it appears to me that men's scruples are becoming less than they were in former days. It may be that the recently discovered, though long practiced, system of irregularities—to speak mildly—in the Postoffice Department accompanied by the alleged astounding embezzlements in the municipal government of the District may stir up this little inward monitor to an appreciable degree of activity, but I doubt it," said the official.

The truth is that a casual glance at the records of what has ever been known as the "conscience fund," the chronicles of guilty minds on file in the office of the United States Treasurer will show that they contain of late years, few, if any, instances of heavy pilferings. It is true that once in a while a comparatively large amount is restored to the coffers of the Government, but it is only once in a while. For some time after the war, when all sorts of stealings were rife in all parts of the country, consciences of the criminals seemed to have reached very respectable proportions and penitence found vent in a regular cornucopia of regrets accompanied by supplies of cash in greenbacks and gold, national bank notes, silver, postage stamps and bonds, and in fact all kinds of wealth in atonement for sins committed against the Government. These returns were made in many ways and the instances are rare—very rare—when the conscience-stricken culprits let their personality be known. Many sought the confessional and salved their sore hearts through the mediation of their father confessors; others availed themselves of express companies; some served their purposes by the means of registered letters, and, on one occasion, a well-dressed and most respectable appearing gentleman sauntered through the corridors of the Treasury and suddenly—unheeding the vigilant messenger at the official portals—opened the door of Gen. Spinner's office, threw a big package on the desk where the old general sat writing, and went out as suddenly as he entered without saying a word. No one followed him. Everyone who saw the performance was stricken with amazement that for a minute or so precluded any attention to the queer actor. He appeared like an apparition, and whence he came and whither he went no one knew. He had, however, washed out the burning embers of his own or some one else's grief, for the package contained a goodly sum of money, wrapped up in a paper marked in large letters, "conscience."

"Smaller and Beautifully Less."

But the "still, small voice" as already mentioned is becoming stiller and smaller by degrees. There may be an eruption again and restitutions made for big thieving, but it is something we shall have to await. The returns now are in small compass. The heaviest of recent date was received from somewhere in the State of New York. It was in a registered package and the amount indorsed was 6,150. Another registered package received, some time last winter contained moneys to the amount of $500. Of this sum $320 was in national bank notes; $150 in silver, and $30 in United States notes. There were no explanations given. The package was addressed "Mr. United States Treasurer, Washington."

The Inward Monitor at Sioux Falls.

A rather pathetic incident, one showing how the consciousness of crime weighs upon the human soul, is pictured in a letter of recent date received from the far away areas of Sioux Falls, S. D. The epistle from the Western wilds contained a two-cent postage stamp and the sender explained that it was "to replace what I defrauded the Government of a few years ago by using a stamp that had once been used. I not only defrauded the Government, but sinned in the sight of God. He has forgiven me so I try to make it right by the United States."

Many other letters making restitution for postage stamps made to do service twice are on file in the room devoted to conscience fund literature and correspondence. Another letter, showing that a knowledge of wrondoing was gnawing at the vitals of an unhappy man was also received recently. It contained a ten-dollar note. The sender explained simply that he did not expect to live very long and was reluctant to leave any debts behind him. His letter was signed "A poor young man." Much of this restitution money—though not so much now as in former days—is because of stealings or irregularities committed during the civil war, showing that men who fought and bled for their country frequently committed indiscretions and irregularities and their letters indicate that in scores upon scores of cases the illegal retention of cash was the result of misconception. One illustration of this is shown in a note to the department sent not long ago by an ex-officer of the army and inclosing fifty-two dollars which was paid to him in settlement of his account. The amount was for the pay of a servant and the officer informs the department he had believed where an officer does his own work he is entitled to the pay of a servant. Long after the war he found out otherwise and remitted the sum he had received. "I want to be all right," he declares.

Shy of the Custom Houses.

"Conscience in the custom houses," remarked the Treasury official referred to in the first part of this story, "is not capering about to any remarkable extent. It seems as if in the many journeys from foreign to home ports the salt water or something else produces a smothering effect upon it. It would be a happy world indeed if every man would follow the dictates of his conscience. The millennium might then be heralded. The trouble is some people have no conscience. Consequently there must be customs inspectors, postal inspectors, Treasury detectives, Secret Service men and others of that ilk constantly on the watch tower. It may be sad, but nevertheless 'tis true."