

CHAPTER VI.

A TESTIMONY UNDER THE GUILLOTINE.

WHILE Paine was in prison the English gentry were gladdened by a rumor that he had been guillotined, and a libellous leaflet of "The Last Dying Words of Thomas Paine" appeared in London. Paine was no less confident than his enemies that his execution was certain—after the denunciation in Amar's report, October 3d—and did indeed utter what may be regarded as his dying words—"The Age of Reason." This was the task which he had from year to year adjourned to his maturest powers, and to it he dedicates what brief remnant of life may await him. That completed, it will be time to die with his comrades, awakened by his pen to a dawn now red with their blood.

The last letter I find written from the old Pompadour mansion is to Jefferson, under date of October 20th :

"DEAR SIR,—I wrote you by Captain Dominick who was to sail from Havre about the 20th of this month. This will probably be brought you by Mr. Barlow or Col. Oswald. Since my letter by Dominick I am every day more convinced and impressed with the propriety of Congress sending Commissioners to Europe to confer with the Ministers of the Jesuitical Powers on the means of terminating the war. The

enclosed printed paper will shew there are a variety of subjects to be taken into consideration which did not appear at first, all of which have some tendency to put an end to the war. I see not how this war is to terminate if some intermediate power does not step forward. There is now no prospect that France can carry revolutions thro' Europe on the one hand, or that the combined powers can conquer France on the other hand. It is a sort of defensive War on both sides. This being the case how is the War to close? Neither side will ask for peace though each may wish it. I believe that England and Holland are tired of the war. Their Commerce and Manufactures have suffered most exceedingly—and besides this it is to them a war without an object. Russia keeps herself at a distance. I cannot help repeating my wish that Congress would send Commissioners, and I wish also that yourself would venture once more across the Ocean as one of them. If the Commissioners rendezvous at Holland they would then know what steps to take. They could call Mr. Pinckney to their Councils, and it would be of use, on many accounts, that one of them should come over from Holland to France. Perhaps a long truce, were it proposed by the neutral Powers, would have all the effects of a Peace, without the difficulties attending the adjustment of all the forms of Peace.—Yours affectionately

THOMAS PAINE.”¹

Thus has finally faded the dream of Paine's life—an international republic.

It is notable that in this letter Paine makes no mention of his own danger. He may have done so in the previous letter, unfound, to which he alludes. Why he made no attempt to escape after Amar's report seems a mystery, especially as he was assisting others to leave the country. Two of his friends, Johnson and Choppin—the last to part from him in the old garden,—escaped to Switzerland. John-

¹ I am indebted for this letter to Dr. John S. H. Fogg, of Boston. The letter is endorsed by Jefferson, “Rec'd Mar. 3.” [1794.]

son will be remembered as the young man who attempted suicide on hearing of Marat's menaces against Paine. Writing to Lady Smith of these two friends, he says :

“ He [Johnson] recovered, and being anxious to get out of France, a passport was obtained for him and Mr. Choppin ; they received it late in the evening, and set off the next morning for Basle, before four, from which place I had a letter from them, highly pleased with their escape from France, into which they had entered with an enthusiasm of patriotic devotion. Ah, France ! thou hast ruined the character of a revolution virtuously begun, and destroyed those who produced it. I might also say like Job's servant, ‘ and I only am escaped.’

“ Two days after they were gone I heard a rapping at the gate, and looking out of the window of the bedroom I saw the landlord going with the candle to the gate, which he opened ; and a guard with muskets and fixed bayonets entered. I went to bed again and made up my mind for prison, for I was the only lodger. It was a guard to take up Johnson and Choppin, but, I thank God, they were out of their reach.

“ The guard came about a month after, in the night, and took away the landlord, Georgeit. And the scene in the house finished with the arrestation of myself. This was soon after you called on me, and sorry I was that it was not in my power to render to Sir [Robert Smith] the service that you asked.”

All then had fled. Even the old landlord had been arrested. In the wintry garden this lone man—in whose brain and heart the republic and the religion of humanity have their abode—moves companionless. In the great mansion, where once Madame de Pompadour glittered amid her courtiers, where in the past summer gathered the Round Table of great-hearted gentlemen and ladies,

Thomas Paine sits through the watches of the night at his devout task.¹

“My friends were falling as fast as the guillotine could cut their heads off, and as I expected, every day, the same fate, I resolved to begin my work. I appeared to myself to be on my death bed, for death was on every side of me, and I had no time to lose. This accounts for my writing at the time I did, and so nicely did the time and intention meet, that I had not finished the first part of the work more than six hours before I was arrested and taken to prison. The people of France were running headlong into atheism, and I had the work translated in their own language, to stop them in that career, and fix them to the first article of every man’s creed, who has any creed at all—*I believe in God.*”²

The second Christmas of the new republican era dawns. Where is the vision that has led this way-worn pilgrim? Where the star he has followed so long, to find it hovering over the new birth of humanity? It may have been on that day that, amid the shades of his slain friends, he wrote, as with

¹ It was a resumed task. Early in the year Paine had brought to his colleague Lanthenas a manuscript on religion, probably entitled “The Age of Reason.” Lanthenas translated it, and had it printed in French, though no trace of its circulation appears. At that time Lanthenas may have apprehended the proscription which fell on him, with the other Girondins, in May, and took the precaution to show Paine’s essay to Couthon, who, with Robespierre, had religious matters particularly in charge. Couthon frowned on the work and on Paine, and reproached Lanthenas for translating it. There was no frown more formidable than that of Couthon, and the essay (printed only in French) seems to have been suppressed. At the close of the year Paine wrote the whole work *de novo*. The first edition in English, now before me, was printed in Paris, by Barrois, 1794. In his preface to Part II., Paine implies a previous draft in saying: “I had not finished it more than six hours, *in the state it has since appeared*, before a guard came,” etc. (The italics are mine.) The fact of the early translation appears in a letter of Lanthenas to Merlin de Thionville.

² Letter to Samuel Adams. The execution of the Girondins took place on October 31st.

blood about to be shed, the tribute to one that was pierced in trying to benefit mankind.

“Nothing that is here said can apply, even with the most distant disrespect, to the real character of Jesus Christ. He was a virtuous and amiable man. The morality that he preached and practised was of the most benevolent kind ; and though similar systems of morality had been preached by Confucius, and by some of the Greek philosophers, many years before, by the Quakers since, and by good men in all ages, it has not been exceeded by any. . . . He preached most excellent morality, and the equality of man ; but he preached also against the corruption and avarice of the Jewish priests, and this brought upon him the hatred and vengeance of the whole order of priesthood. The accusation which those priests brought against him was that of sedition and conspiracy against the Roman government, to which the Jews were then subject and tributary ; and it is not improbable that the Roman government might have some secret apprehension of the effect of his doctrine, as well as the Jewish priests ; neither is it improbable that Jesus Christ had in contemplation the delivery of the Jewish nation from the bondage of the Romans. Between the two, however, this virtuous reformer and religionist lost his life. . . . He was the son of God in like manner that every other person is—for the Creator is the Father of All. . . . Jesus Christ founded no new system. He called men to the practice of moral virtues, and the belief of one God. The great trait in his character is philanthropy.”

Many Christmas sermons were preached in 1793, but probably all of them together do not contain so much recognition of the humanity of Jesus as these paragraphs of Paine. The Christmas bells ring in the false, but shall also ring in the true. While he is writing, on that Christmas night, word comes that he has been denounced by Bourdon de l’Oise, and expelled from the Convention. He now enters the Dark Valley. “Conceiving, after

this, that I had but a few days of liberty I sat down, and brought the work to a close as speedily as possible."

In the "Age of Reason" there is a page of personal recollections. I have a feeling that this little episode marks the hour when Paine was told of his doom. From this overshadowed Christmas, likely to be his last, the lonely heart—as loving a heart as ever beat—here wanders across tempestuous years to his early Norfolkshire home. There is a grateful remembrance of the Quaker meeting, the parental care, the Grammar School; of his pious aunt who read him a printed sermon, and the garden steps where he pondered what he had just heard,—a Father demanding his Son's death for the sake of making mankind happier and better. He "perfectly recollects the spot" in the garden where, even then, but seven or eight years of age, he felt sure a man would be executed for doing such a thing, and that God was too good to act in that way. So clearly come out the scenes of childhood under the shadow of death.

He probably had an intimation on December 27th that he would be arrested that night. The place of his abode, though well known to the authorities, was not in the Convention's Almanach. Officially, therefore, his residence was still in the Passage des Petits Pères. There the officers would seek him, and there he should be found. "For that night only he sought a lodging there," reported the officers afterwards. He may have feared, too, that his manuscript would be destroyed if he were taken in his residence.

His hours are here traceable. On the evening of December 27th, in the old mansion, Paine reaches the last page of the "Age of Reason." They who have supposed him an atheist, may search as far as Job, who said "Though He slay me I will trust in Him," before finding an author who, caught in the cruel machinery of destructive nature, could write that last page.

"The creation we behold is the real and ever existing word of God, in which we cannot be deceived. It proclaimeth his power, it demonstrates his wisdom, it manifests his goodness and beneficence. The moral duty of man consists in imitating the moral goodness and beneficence of God manifested in the creation towards all his creatures. That seeing, as we daily do, the goodness of God to all men, it is an example calling upon all men to practise the same towards each other, and consequently that everything of persecution and revenge between man and man, and everything of cruelty to animals, is a violation of moral duty."

In what "Israel" is greater faith found? Having written these words, the pen drops from our world-wanderer's hand. It is nine o'clock of the night. He will now go and bend his neck under the decree of the Convention—provided by "the goodness of God to all men." Through the Faubourg, past Porte St. Martin, to the Rue Richelieu, to the Passage des Petits Pères, he walks in the wintry night. In the house where he wrote his appeal that the Convention would slay not the man in destroying the monarch, he asks a lodging "for that night only."

As he lays his head on the pillow, it is no doubt with a grateful feeling that the good God has prolonged his freedom long enough to finish a defence

of true religion from its degradation by superstition or destruction by atheism,—these, as he declares, being the two purposes of his work. It was providently if not providentially timed. “I had not finished it more than six hours, in the state it has since appeared, before a guard came, about three in the morning, with an order, signed by the two Committees of Public Safety and Surety General, for putting me in arrestation as a foreigner, and conveying me to the prison of the Luxembourg.”

The following documents are translated for this work from the originals in the National Archives of France.

“NATIONAL CONVENTION.

“Committee of General Surety and Surveillance of the National Convention.

“On the 7th Nivose [December 27th] of the 2d year of the French Republic, one and indivisible.

“TO THE DEPUTIES :

“The Committee resolves, that the persons named Thomas Paine and Anacharsis Clootz, formerly Deputies to the National Convention, be arrested and imprisoned, as a measure of General Surety ; that an examination be made of their papers, and those found suspicious put under seal and brought to the Committee of General Surety.

“Citizens Jean Baptiste Martin and Lamy, bearers of the present decree are empowered to execute it,—for which they ask the help of the Civil authorities and, if need be, of the army.

“The representatives of the nation, members of the Committee of General Surety—Signed : M. Bayle, Voulland, Jagot, Amar, Vadier, Élie Lacoste, Guffroy, Louis (du bas Rhin) La Vicomterie, Panis.”

“This day, the 8th Nivose of the 2d year of the French Republic, one and indivisible, to execute and fulfil the order

given us, we have gone to the residence of Citizen Thomas Paine, Passage des Petits Pères, number seven, Philadelphia House. Having requested the Commander of the [Police] post, William Tell Section, to have us escorted, according to the order we showed him, he obeyed by assigning us four privates and a corporal, to search the above-said lodging; where we requested the porter to open the door, and asked him whether he knew all who lodged there; and as he did not affirm it, we desired him to take us to the principal agent, which he did; having come to the said agent, we asked him if he knew by name all the persons to whom he rented lodgings; after having repeated to him the name mentioned in our order, he replied to us, that he had come to ask him a lodging for that night only; which being ascertained, we asked him to conduct us to the bedroom of Citizen Thomas Paine, where we arrived; then seeing we could not be understood by him, an American, we begged the manager of the house, who knows his language, to kindly interpret for him, giving him notice of the order of which we were bearers; whereupon the said Citizen Thomas Paine submitted to be taken to Rue Jacob, Great Britain Hotel, which he declared through his interpreter to be the place where he had his papers; having recognized that his lodging contained none of them, we accompanied the said Thomas Paine and his interpreter to Great Britain Hotel, Rue Jacob, Unity Section; the present minutes closed, after being read before the undersigned.

“(Signed):

THOMAS PAINE. J. B. MARTIN.
 DORLÉ, Commissary.
 GILLET, Commissary.
 F. DELLANAY.
 ACHILLE AUDIBERT, Witness.¹
 LAMY.”

“And as it was about seven or eight o'clock in the morning of this day 8th Nivose, being worn out with fatigue, and forced to take some food, we postponed the end of our proceeding till eleven o'clock of the same day, when, desiring to finish it, we

¹ It will be remembered that Audibert had carried to London Paine's invitation to the Convention.

went with Citizen Thomas Paine to Britain House, where we found Citizen Barlow, whom Citizen Thomas Paine informed that we, the Commissaries, were come to look into the papers, which he said were at his house, as announced in our preceding paragraph through Citizen Dellanay, his interpreter ; We, Commissary of the Section of the Unity, undersigned, with the Citizens order-bearers, requested Citizen Barlow to declare whether there were in his house, any papers or correspondence belonging to Citizen Thomas Paine ; on which, complying with our request, he declared there did not exist any ; but wishing to leave no doubt on our way of conducting the matter, we did not think it right to rely on what he said ; resolving, on the contrary, to ascertain by all legal ways that there did not exist any, we requested Citizen Barlow to open for us all his cupboards ; which he did, and after having visited them, we, the abovesaid Commissary, always in the presence of Citizen Thomas Paine, recognized that there existed no papers belonging to him ; we also perceived that it was a subterfuge on the part of Citizen Thomas Paine who wished only to transfer himself to the house of Citizen Barlow, his native friend (*son ami natal*) whom we invited to ask of Citizen Thomas Paine his usual place of abode ; and the latter seemed to wish that his friend might accompany him and be present at the examination of his papers. Which we, the said Commissary granted him, as Citizen Barlow could be of help to us, together with Citizen Etienne Thomas Dessous, interpreter for the English language, and Deputy Secretary to the Committee of General Surety of the National Convention, whom we called, in passing by the said Committee, to accompany us to the true lodging of the said Paine, Faubourg du Nord, Nro. 63. At which place we entered his rooms, and gathered in the Sitting-room all the papers found in the other rooms of the said apartment. The said Sitting-room receives light from three windows, looking, one on the Garden and the two others on the Courtyard ; and after the most scrupulous examination of all the papers, that we had there gathered, none of them has been found suspicious, neither in French nor in English, according to what was affirmed to us by Citizen Dessous our interpreter who signed with us, and Citizen Thomas Paine ; and we, the undersigned Commissary, resolved that no seal should be placed, after the

examination mentioned, and closed the said minutes, which we declare to contain the truth. Drawn up at the residence, and closed at 4 p.m. in the day and year abovenamed; and we have all signed after having read the minutes.

“(Signed) :

THOMAS PAINE. JOEL BARLOW.
DORLÉ, Commissary. GILLET, Commissary.
DESSOUS. J. B. MARTIN. LAMY.

“And after having signed we have requested, according to the order of the Committee of General Surety of the National Convention, Citizen Thomas Paine to follow us, to be led to jail; to which he complied without any difficulty, and he has signed with us :

THOMAS PAINE. J. B. MARTIN.
DORLÉ, Commissary. LAMY.
GILLET, Commissary.”

“I have received from the Citizens Martin and Lamy, Deputy-Secretaries to the Committee of General Surety of the National Convention, the Citizens Thomas Paine and Anacharsis Clootz, formerly Deputies; by order of the said Committee.

“At the Luxembourg, this day 8th Nivose, 2nd year of the French Republic, One and Indivisible.

“Signed : BENOIT, *Concierge.*”

“FOREIGN OFFICE—Received the 12th Ventose [March 2d]. Sent to the Committees of General Surety and Public Safety the 8th Pluviose [January 27th] this 2d year of the French Republic, One and indivisible.

“Signed : BASSOL, *Secretary.*”

“CITIZENS LEGISLATORS!—The French nation has, by a universal decree, invited to France one of our countrymen, most worthy of honor, namely, Thomas Paine, one of the political founders of the independence and of the Republic of America.

“Our experience of twenty years has taught America to know and esteem his public virtues and the invaluable services he rendered her.

“Persuaded that his character of foreigner and ex-Deputy is the only cause of his provisional imprisonment, we come in the

name of our country (and we feel sure she will be grateful to us for it), we come to you, Legislators, to reclaim our friend, our countryman, that he may sail with us for America, where he will be received with open arms.

“If it were necessary to say more in support of the Petition which, as friends and allies of the French Republic, we submit to her representatives, to obtain the liberation of one of the most earnest and faithful apostles of liberty, we would beseech the National Convention, for the sake of all that is dear to the glory and to the heart of freemen, not to give a cause of joy and triumph to the allied tyrants of Europe, and above all to the despotism of Great Britain, which did not blush to outlaw this courageous and virtuous defender of Liberty.

“But their insolent joy will be of short duration ; for we have the intimate persuasion that you will not keep longer in the bonds of painful captivity the man whose courageous and energetic pen did so much to free the Americans, and whose intentions we have no doubt whatever were to render the same services to the French Republic. Yes, we feel convinced that his principles and views were pure, and in that regard he is entitled to the indulgence due to human fallibility, and to the respect due to rectitude of heart ; and we hold all the more firmly our opinion of his innocence, inasmuch as we are informed that after a scrupulous examination of his papers, made by order of the Committee of General Surety, instead of anything to his charge, enough has been found rather to corroborate the purity of his principles in politics and morals.

“As a countryman of ours, as a man above all so dear to the Americans, who like yourselves are earnest friends of Liberty, we ask you, in the name of that goddess cherished of the only two Republics of the World, to give back Thomas Paine to his brethren and permit us to take him to his country which is also ours.

“If you require it, Citizens Representatives, we shall make ourselves warrant and security for his conduct in France during the short stay he may make in this land.

“Signed :

W. JACKSON, of Philadelphia. J. RUSSELL, of Boston. PETER WHITESIDE, of Philadelphia. HENRY JOHNSON, of Boston. THOMAS CARTER, of Newbury Port. JAMES COOPER of Phila-

delphia. JOHN WILLERT BILLOPP, of New York. THOMAS WATERS GRIFFITH, of Baltimore. TH. RAMSDEN, of Boston. SAMUEL P. BROOME, of New York. A. MEADENWORTH, of Connecticut. JOEL BARLOW, of Connecticut. MICHAEL ALCORN, of Philadelphia. M. ONEALY, of Baltimore. JOHN MCPHERSON, of Alexandria [Va.]. WILLIAM HASKINS, of Boston. J. GREGORY, of Petersburg, Virginia. JAMES INGRAHAM, of Boston.”¹

The following answer to the petitioning Americans was given by Vadier, then president of the Convention.

“CITIZENS : The brave Americans are our brothers in liberty ; like us they have broken the chains of despotism ; like us they have sworn the destruction of kings and vowed an eternal hatred to tyrants and their instruments. From this identity of principles should result a union of the two nations forever unalterable. If the tree of liberty already flourishes in the two hemispheres, that of commerce should, by this happy alliance, cover the poles with its fruitful branches. It is for France, it is for the United States, to combat and lay low, in concert, these proud islanders, these insolent dominators of the sea and the commerce of nations. When the sceptre of despotism is falling from the criminal hand of the tyrants of the earth, it is necessary also to break the trident which emboldens the insolence of these corsairs of Albion, these modern Carthaginians. It is time to repress the audacity and mercantile avarice of these pirate tyrants of the sea, and of the commerce of nations.

“You demand of us, citizens, the liberty of Thomas Paine ; you wish to restore to your hearths this defender of the rights of man. One can only applaud this generous movement. Thomas Paine is a native of England ; this is undoubtedly enough to apply to him the measures of security prescribed by the revolutionary laws. It may be added, citizens, that if Thomas Paine has been the apostle of liberty, if he has powerfully co-operated with the American Revolution, his genius has not understood that which has regenerated France ; he has regarded the system only in accordance with the illusions with

¹ The preceding documents connected with the arrest are in the Archives Nationales, F. 4641.

which the false friends of our revolution have invested it. You must with us deplore an error little reconcilable with the principles admired in the justly esteemed works of this republican author.

“The National Convention will take into consideration the object of your petition, and invites you to its sessions.”

A memorandum adds: “Reference of this petition is decreed to the Committees of Public Safety and General Surety, united.”

It is said that Paine sent an appeal for intervention to the Cordeliers Club, and that their only reply was to return to him a copy of his speech in favor of preserving the life of Louis XVI. This I have not been able to verify.

On leaving his house for prison, Paine entrusted to Joel Barlow the manuscript of the “Age of Reason,” to be conveyed to the printer. This was with the knowledge of the guard, whose kindness is mentioned by Paine.