Introduction

HARDLY was the American Revolution finished, when the seeds were sown for the Federalist Plot, which ultimately shook the young nation to its very foundations—and almost destroyed it. More will be said of this conspiracy later; now I would like to recall one incident. It concerns a letter which John Adams, one of the Federalist leaders, sent to the traitor, Timothy Pickering. In it, Adams said contemptuously:

"There is not an idea in it (the Declaration of Independence) but what had been hackneyed in Congress for two years before . . ."

Jefferson, the well-loved and trusted leader of the democratic forces in America, had been for some time the foremost target of the Federalists. He knew how to take mud-slinging; quietly, he answered:

"I did not consider it as any part of my charge to invent new ideas altogether and to offer no sentiment which had never been expressed before. Not to find out new principles, or new arguments, never before thought of, not merely to say things which had never been said before; but to place before mankind the *common sense* of the subject. Neither aiming at originality of principles or sentiments, it was intended to be an *expression of the American mind.*"

The italics are mine; but it is no accident that, so many years after, Jefferson refers to the ideas incorporated in the Declaration of Independence as *common sense*—the title of Paine's first and far-reaching major work. And the phrase "expression of the American mind" is one of the most important clues, not only to the writings of Paine and Jefferson, but to the whole democratic system that sprang from their times.

The difference, however, between the writings of Paine and Jefferson, is the difference between an almost uneducated working

man and the foremost philosopher of the culture of democracy that the eighteenth century produced. The question most often asked about Paine, is how he did it, a question no one asks concerning Jefferson; so much of a fetish has the idea of formal education become. Paine never hid his lack of education; he had read very few books, never studied in the formal sense; yet this very fact is looked upon suspiciously—a sort of ridiculous hindsight that accuses Paine of ostentatiously wearing the clothes of the common man, clothes he did not own. It is the sort of thinking that proclaims to the world, year in, year out, tediously, that Shakespeare could not have written Shakespeare, since the thoughts, needs, and emotions of people cannot be gathered from the people themselves but only from the printed page.

Both Paine and Jefferson knew otherwise; both were immensely sensitive to the people. A new time was coming into the world, the time of the common man, a new sound, a new hope, a new way of life.

Thomas Paine was born in Thetford on January 29, 1737. Thetford is a little village in Norfolk, England; and it is important, for any real understanding of Paine, to note and remember that he was born an Englishman—and an Englishman he remained, an Englishman because he loved the tight little isle that fathered him, the strange complex of liberty and bondage, hope and despair; and a citizen of the world because he loved all mankind. That was Paine, and that was one of the things that branded him apart from other American and French patriots.

We don't know too much of Paine's early life. An intense and clean objectivity was so much a quality of Paine's writing, that he himself as an individual comes to light only in the briefest snatches. And when, many years later, serious biographers undertook an investigation of the boy who had fathered the incredible man, they found almost nothing on which to base any conclusions. Those who had known him personally were dead; hearsay was colored out of any resemblance to the truth by the years of calumny and praise that were heaped on the man.

So all that Conway * and others say of his early life must be

* Moncure D. Conway, *The Life of Thomas Paine*, Two Volumes, New York, 1892.

taken with many grains of salt. Much we can surmise. He came of the lowest landless class when class divisions were knife-sharp. As a child, he saw too much, and most of it hurt; if there was any real happiness in his childhood, he would have recalled more of it than he did, not shunned it as a bad dream. He had some schooling at the charity school at Thetford; how much we don't know. Early, he learned his father's trade of corset making; and that he hated it is proven by the fact that so much of his early life was an attempt to escape it.

What surrounded him at Thetford, what made him? The squire who lorded the place, the Quaker influence of his father, the dull mother who forgot him a decade after he left home, the bucolic drift of country life, the servile trade he learned—all that should not have marked him apart. There was more, much more that we don't know and can only guess at—but whatever it was it forged a rebel, a stiff-necked, defiant prophet who from his teens pleaded the cause of justice and right.

Twice, young Tom Paine attempted to run away to sea, to ship aboard a privateer. Well, that was one of the few ways out; but it was like leaving Nazi Germany by way of a concentration camp, and the boy must have been desperate indeed. The second time, he succeeded in escaping Thetford, and he did not return for many years. He was sixteen when he made his escape, but he stuck to the privateer only for the coastwise trip down to London; there, somehow, he managed to desert the ship.

There was a period of London wandering—which ended in Paine's apprenticing himself to a staymaker. Many such periods appear in Paine's pre-American life; they must have been times of futile desperation, attempts to escape the rat cage that always closed him in at the end. But they were periods of education too. London of the latter eighteenth century was, for at least half its population, as close an approximation of hell as is possible to create on this earth. The enclosure laws of the previous two centuries had created a huge landless population that gravitated toward the urban centers, mostly toward London, to form a half-human mob, not peasants, not craftsmen—the first tragic beginnings of a real working class. But the primitive capitalism of the time could not absorb

even a fraction of the mob. Starvation, thievery, murder, and drunkenness were the order of the day. The section where these people lived was known as the Gin Mill; gin was their only escape. No doubt, when Paine went into the Gin Mill, when he sought to escape staymaking through that valley of hopelessness, gin was his surcease too. He went as low as the people, suffered with them, attempted their avenues of escape, and thereby came to understand them. Admirers of Paine attempt to make him a teetotaler; his enemies make him out a drunkard. He was neither; he lived in an age of heavy drinking, and in that age, Paine was an exceptionally moderate drinker. His drunkenness was periodic, an attempt to escape; it was the only way of escape he had, for he could not go into himself and leave the world alone.

That was Paine's pre-American life, up and down, hope and despair. Staymaking, revolt, wandering—desperate ventures at other trades. At the age of twenty-two, Paine married a servant girl; less than a year later she died: another chapter that Paine was loath to recall. What was she like—what was their relationship like? That, we don't know.

At the age of twenty-five, Paine escaped staymaking—into one of the most unenviable trades in Britain, that of an exciseman. Tax collecting in a country that existed only by virtue of wholesale smuggling and tax evasion was not a happy business. He stood it for a while, and then, as before, went back, hopelessly, to staymaking. He tried other trades, cobbling, some cabinet-making; but the degree of hopelessness was the same. Always back to staymaking. Again desperation, and again a return to tax collecting.

This was the time of Paine's second marriage. He was a boarder with a tobacconist in Lewes, and when the shopkeeper died, Paine married his daughter, Elizabeth Ollive. Whether he was motivated by love or pity, we don't know, but he took on the responsibilities of the girl, the widowed mother, and a shop that was fast going into bankruptcy. Stretch the ends as he would, they could not be made to meet; and from this came Paine's first groping effort toward organization and his first written work *The Case of the Officers of the Excise.*

Wages of tax officers had been fixed more than a century before,

and the rising spiral of prices had made these men long and silent sufferers, forced finally to choose between dishonesty or starvation. Paine organized them, organized their case, and pled it in a petition to Parliament. The plea was refused.

Again the old pattern in Paine's life, the shop in debt, bankruptcy, Paine fleeing to escape the debtor's prison, Paine going down and down and down, the shadow-land bottom layer of society, the gin mill. Paine left his wife; or perhaps she left him. That part of his life remained closed, and he never opened it. Paine disappeared into the maw of beggar's London. Paine re-emerged, passage money to America in his pocket, to confront Benjamin Franklin, demanding help from the great man, and a letter of introduction to an American. What drew Franklin to Paine, to the unprepossessing, poverty-stricken corset-maker and tax collector? Franklin never wrote the details of that first meeting; Paine's objectivity did not later permit a discussion of what Franklin thought, of what he, Paine, thought. Again, only surmise can fill the gap. But Franklin gave Paine a letter of introduction to a man in America, advised him to go to the new world—and so began the political history of the first great international champion of mankind.

Even with these few sketchy facts, we can begin to understand what made the man, Thomas Paine, and what forces gave birth to the flaming documents he wrote—documents that moved more men to more earth-shaking results, politically, than any up to that time and even since that time, if we except the writings of Marx, Engels, and Lenin.

The single, most important clue to Paine's writings is that they are *dynamic*. Let us see what is meant by that and whether we cannot relate the meaning to both the man and his experiences. Before Paine ever wrote a word, there were political philosophers in plenty: Voltaire, Locke, Milton, Cromwell, Rousseau, to name only a few. In America, long before Paine's time, such popular leaders as William Penn and Roger Williams had put the most advanced social and political theory of the age into practice, and what's more had, within limits of time and space, made those theories operate successfully. But there was a most important difference between the writing of these men and Paine's writing—indeed, between Paine's

writing and the writing of so many political philosophers who came after him. And the difference may be summed up in this fashion:

They wrote abstractly of the pattern of change; Paine wrote realistically of the method of change. They were philosophers who created political philosophy; Paine was a revolutionist who created a method for revolution. They moved men to thought; Paine moved men to thought and action. They dealt with theory and ideals; Paine dealt with the dynamics of one force playing against another.

Note how these factors in Paine's writing are forecast by the events during the first thirty-seven years of his life. Thoughtless persons will say that the picture presented is simply that of a rebel, an unconscious rebel who protested against anything and everything. I call them thoughtless because rebellion is a term for action, not belief; Paine's belief was in change; this was his faith, that all is dynamic and subject to change, that nothing is immutable. That is the pattern of both his life and his writing, subjectively and objectively: an unconquerable desire to substitute good for bad, hope for despair. He believed in change, and so fervent was his belief that never, regardless of how bloody his head, would he accept the status quo.

Paine was never content with his lot, nor was he ever content with the lot of his fellow man. He believed it could be better. Follow the pattern: he believed there were better things to occupy a man than corset-making or cobbling. He believed that the lot of tax collectors could be bettered, if they worked actively toward that betterment. He saw poverty, the deepest kind of poverty, and he felt that a thing so evil should be wiped from the face of the earth. He never accepted anything but change.

And in November of 1774, he came to America, where change was the order of the day. He came to an America that was rumbling and quivering like a volcano about to erupt, and he put his ear to the ground and listened.

Let us glance, very briefly, at the America Paine came to. It was not a single, unified nation, but thirteen separate colonial areas—areas, however, with many things in common: they were being exploited by the same overseas empire; they spoke—the majority of them—the same language; they all suffered from the colonial status