

## CHAPTER II CHILDHOOD

### I. A SON IS BORN

ON February 6, 1756, Esther Burr was "unexpectedly delivered of a Son," and "had a fine time altho it pleased God in infinite wisdom so to order it that Mr. Burr was from home." But, she rattled on, "I had a very quick & good time. A very good laying in till a but 3 weeks, then I had the Canker very bad, & before I had recovered of that my little Aaron (for so we call him) was taken very Sick so [that] for some days we did not expect his life. He has never been so well Since tho he is comfortable at present."<sup>1</sup> His sister Sally was almost two now. There were to be no more children. Tragedy was lurking in the shadows.

But the protagonists did not know it at the time. They were still at Newark, in the parsonage at the juncture of Broad and William. The College buildings were growing slowly. Esther Burr was in raptures over them. "The College," she exclaims lyrically, "is a Famous building I assure you & the most commodious of any of the Colleges as well as much the largest of any upon the Continent. There is Something very Striking in it & a grandure & yet a Simplicity [that] cant well be expressed."<sup>2</sup>

Her husband was noticeably more controlled in his enthusiasms. "We have begun a Building at Princeton," he wrote his Scotch correspondent, "which contains a Hall Library & Rooms to accommodate about an 100 Students, tho it will not any more of it be finished than is absolutely necessary at present, with an house for the President. We do everything in the plainest & cheapest manner, as far as is consistent with Decency & Convenience, having no superfluous ornaments." But he is satisfied. The students are behaving well. There are, in fact, some among them "that give good evidences of real Piety, & a prospect of special Usefulness in the Churches of Christ."<sup>3</sup> That, after all, was the all-important thing: The training of missionaries to spread the new unrest, the inner agitation, to all America.

Little Aaron was only six months old when a company of soldiers was quartered on the parsonage unexpectedly. Esther was not pleased. That night she scribbled in her diary: "50 Soldiers to

Sup at this House & Lodge which Surprized me much, but they behaved better than I expected considering they came from Road Island. They are going for recrutes."<sup>4</sup> The Colonies, it seems, were not free from sectional prejudices.

The very next morning she set out with her infant son — Sally remained at home — "in a Waggon for Stockbridge." It was the long-anticipated, arduous journey to revisit her family. They welcomed her — mother, sisters, brothers, and the slightly bewildered, if still unbending Jonathan. To him she fled with the secret doubts that had troubled her soul — religious fears of which she did not wish her husband to know — and her father soothed, advised, and poured the sweet oil of his wisdom over their festerings. She came back via New York, feeling infinitely refreshed.

But alas! Poor little Aaron, who had stood the journey quite well, took immediately ill with a hoarse throat and violent fever. "The Doct Said he was affraid the Child would not live till morn." The frantic mother went through agonies, but in the morning the little one was still alive, to the vast astonishment of the learned doctor. He mended, did Aaron, but very slowly, and "O my dear," Esther cried to her confidante, Miss Prince, "help us to bless the Lord for his great mercies. I look on the Child as one given to me from the dead. What obligations are we laid under to bring up this Child in a peculiar manner for God?"<sup>5</sup> One wonders, had she lived, what sentiments she would have set down in her diary anent the strange course of her son's career.

In December, 1756, the College buildings having been put in a fair state of completion, they removed to Princeton. It was hard and wearing, this pulling up of stakes, this removal of an institution. Mr. Burr confessed to his friend, the great evangelist, Whitefield, that "the fatigue I have had in the care of the College this winter has been greater than ever, being obliged to do the duty of a Tutor as well as my own." But it did not matter. For, "blessed be God I never had so much comfort in my little Society. There has been a growing concern about the great things of religion among my pupils for some time past. Some of the most vain & careless greatly reformed and some enquiring the way to Zion."<sup>6</sup>

They were quite definitely in the throes of a great revival. Whether it was the sermons and exhortations of the President, or an intangible something that sweeps over even the most intelligent societies at times, the young students had received the inner illumination that comes from a state of grace and were acting accordingly.

But neither he nor his wife found any incongruities in the situa-

tion. It was the accepted mode of obtaining "Grace." Esther gave hallelujah. "Good news my dear," she penned joyfully. "I have to tell you this morning a Ministers Son near Philadelphia hopefully received Comfort last Night in the Night. There was little Sleep amongst them. Some up all Night. Mr. Spencer Sat up till 1 o'clock then left there poor young creatures Seeking God. . . . Mr. Burr Says he thinks [it] evidently a Work of Grace."<sup>7</sup> And again, Mr. Burr told her that the "great part of the Schollars are gathered into one Room Crying in great distress & [that] another has received comfort. My Heart Exults at the thought [that] God is about to revive Religion in general." Esther Burr, in spite of certain worldly distractions, was a deeply religious woman.

The Princeton Revival made a great noise in the outside world. Inquiries poured in seeking first-hand knowledge of the late "remarkable occurrences."<sup>8</sup> President Burr was inordinately pleased, albeit exhausted. At no time had he been happier. But already the first clouds were gathering.

In May, Esther's sister became ill with the smallpox — there were always epidemics — and Esther had attended to her. In spite of her fears she escaped infection. The next alarm was for "Mr. Burr." He had played with a little dog they had taken home from her ill sister's home. A month of dreadful anxiety passed, and then the clouds lifted — temporarily. They were both still unscathed.

Meanwhile the children were growing apace. In September, 1757, the mother considered them with an impartial eye and jotted down the results on paper. "Sally has got pretty hearty again, is not much of a Baby, affects to be thought a Woman. Nothing She Scorns more than to be told She is a Baby or Child. We are about Sending her to School, but Mr. Burr is expecting [that] She will prove a numbhead." But as for her son, she sensed other things. "Aaron," she noted, "is a little dirty Noisy Boy very different from Sally almost in every thing. He begins to talk [a] little, is very Sly and mischievous. He has more sprightliness than Sally & most say he is handsomer, but not so good tempered. He is very resolute & requires a good Governor to bring him to terms."<sup>9</sup>

## 2. SWIFT TRAGEDY

And now, in swift and crashing crescendo, grim tragedy stalked the luckless family. President Burr was a slight, spare man, and the imperious demands of his situation had sapped his vigor. Still exhausted from the emotional orgy of the revival, he set off in

August, 1757, to Stockbridge to confer with his father-in-law. On his return from that tedious journey, he found it necessary to set off at once to Elizabethtown to meet Governor Belcher on business relating to the College. There he learned of the death of a friend's wife, and hastened to the house of mourning to preach the funeral sermon.

He took ill with a fever when he finally returned to Princeton, but, scorning mundane ailments, he took post to Philadelphia, once more on behalf of his beloved College. No sooner had he returned from there than the tidings were brought him of the death of Governor Belcher. It was a terrific shock. They had been close friends, and the College of New-Jersey was much beholden to the efforts of the Governor. He himself was by now quite ill, yet, disregarding all protestations, he went once more to Elizabethtown to preach a lofty and moving sermon at the bier of his friend. It was the last straw. He barely managed to get home and went immediately to bed, delirious. He never arose, dying quietly on September 24, 1757.

His death made a deep impression. His contemporaries knew that a great and good man had passed. His funeral took place in the College he had loved and labored mightily for; it was attended by a tremendous outpouring of people; the newly appointed Governor of New Jersey delivered a glowing eulogium, his praises were sung in press and pulpit alike, and finally his remains were deposited in the College churchyard.

The Reverend Ezra Stiles, preacher and tutor at Yale, heard of the sad event and sat down to his diary. "President Burr I was *intimately* acquainted with," he said. "He was a little small Man as to body, but of great and well improved Mind . . . He was a hard Student. A good classical Scholar in the 3 learned Tongues: — was well studied in Logic, Rhet., Nat. & Mor Phil., the belles Lettres, History, Divinity, & Politics. He was an excellent Divine & Preacher, pious & agreeable, facetious & sociable, the eminent Xtian & every way the worthy Man. Like St. Paul his bodily presence was mean & contemptible, but his mental presence charmed all his Acquaintance. He was an Hon. to his College & an ornament to the Repub. of Letters."<sup>10</sup>

He left a not very large estate. His salary had been small and the demands on his purse heavy. But it was sufficient for the needs of his widow and their two small children.<sup>11</sup>

It was a terrible shock to poor Esther. Only by calling on the consolations of religion was she able to achieve a measure of peace. All the training of a lifetime was brought to bear. "O, dear

madam," she wrote her mother, "I doubt not but I have your, and my honored father's prayers, daily, for me; but, give me leave to intreat you both, to request earnestly of the Lord that I may never despise his chastenings, nor faint under this his severe stroke; of which I am sensible there is great danger, if God should only deny me the supports that he has hitherto graciously granted."<sup>12</sup>

Her grief later gave way to exaltation, to a raptness that comes only to the zealot. Her rhapsodic outburst to her father, barely a month after the death of her husband, and with little Aaron, who had proved to be a delicate, ailing child, in the throes of another attack, smacks strongly of the glowing visions and the joyous renunciations of the Middle Ages. "God has carried me through new trials, and given me new supports," she cries. "My little son has been sick with a slow fever . . . and has been brought to the brink of the grave. But I hope, in mercy, God is bringing him up again. I was enabled to resign the child, after a severe struggle with nature, with the greatest freedom. God showed me that the child was not my own, but his, and that he had a right to recall what he had lent whenever he thought fit . . . A few days after this, one evening, in talking of the glorious state my dear departed must be in, my soul was carried out in such longing desires after this glorious state, that I was forced to retire from the family to conceal my joy. When alone, I was so transported, and my soul carried out in such eager desires after perfection, and the full enjoyment of God, and to serve him uninterruptedly, that I think my nature would not have borne much more. I think I had that night a foretaste of Heaven."<sup>13</sup>

Poor lady! She spoke wiser than she knew. For now calamity fell with renewed force upon them all. Young Aaron was better, but Jonathan Edwards was soon dead. He had been called by the Trustees to Princeton in January, 1758, to replace his deceased son-in-law as President of the College. The smallpox epidemic was still raging, and Edwards sought protection in inoculation. Unfortunately, the inoculation developed seriously, and on March 22, 1758, he died. A month before, his own father had preceded him.

His daughter Esther was not long to survive him. Already she had taken the smallpox taint, and on April 7, 1758, she, too, succumbed to the epidemic disease, aged twenty-seven.

Nor was the tale yet complete. The two orphaned children — Sally, aged four, and Aaron, aged two — had been hurriedly transported to Philadelphia and placed under the temporary care of

Dr. Shippen, a friend of the family. Their grandmother, Sarah Edwards, Jonathan's wife, journeyed there in September to take them to her own home. In less than two weeks she, too, was dead — of dysentery.

Father, mother, grandfather, grandmother, great-grandfather — all in the space of a year!

### 3. ORPHANS

The young orphans remained under the kindly care of Dr. Shippen until 1761, when Timothy Edwards, their uncle and eldest brother of Esther Burr, assumed their guardianship. They were taken to Stockbridge, and in 1762 were removed with Timothy and his family to Elizabethtown, New Jersey.

The Reverend Timothy Edwards — he, too, was of the elect — was not exactly the proper person to rear his high-spirited young charge. He inherited the sternness and straitlaced morality of his great father without those other and more winning qualities that had made him adored by his children. The reverend gentleman believed in strict obedience, in the gloomy repressions of an ultra-Puritanic household, in the free use of the rod and long, preceding moral exhortations and castigations. Small wonder that the boy rebelled. He ran away on several occasions; once, at the age of ten, getting as far as New York, where he shipped as a cabin boy on a boat making ready for sea. He was discovered by his guardian in time and incontinently hauled home.<sup>14</sup>

But Timothy Edwards was an honest, if somewhat narrow-visioned, gentleman. He accounted strictly to the Burr estate for the funds deposited in his hands for the support of the two children, and he dealt with them fairly according to his lights. Nor did Burr harbor any resentment against him in after years.

They were given private tutors, and Aaron, at least, made rapid progress. Sally, though not quite as keen-witted, did well by herself in the process of achieving an education. One of their tutors was Tapping Reeve, who fell in love with his young pupil, and eventually married her. They went to Litchfield, Connecticut, to live, and Reeve was to become a great lawyer, the founder of the first law school in the Colonies, and ultimately to be elevated to the Supreme Court of the newly formed State as its Chief Justice. All their lives there was to exist a warm friendship between Aaron Burr and his erstwhile teacher.

There were diversions, of course. Sailing and swimming, hunt-

ing, riding and fishing with young Matthias Ogden, a year his elder, and brother-in-law to Timothy on his wife's side. He, too, was a member of the Edwards' menage. This friendship persisted also in later years, surviving the mutual hardships of the campaign against Quebec, and outlasting the more perilous difficulties of maturity. Aaron Burr had a faculty even in these tender years of attaching warm loyalties to himself.

He did very well in his studies. An uncle, Pierpont Edwards, himself only thirteen, wrote of his small nephew and school-fellow, aged seven. "Aaron Burr is here, is hearty, goes to school, and learns bravely."<sup>15</sup>

So well had he learned that at the age of eleven he was positive that he was sufficiently prepared for college. Naturally there was only one place to be considered — Princeton. His whole family fortunes had been bound up in a peculiar degree with the existence of this institution for the breeding of Presbyterian ministers and incidental inculcation in the classical amenities.

He applied, and was refused — much to his disgust and mortification. Not because he was not qualified — the requirements for entrance were lamentably meager — but because of his extreme youth and tiny stature. "Little Burr" he was in youth and "little Burr" he was to remain throughout life. He was a handsome youngster, with small, delicate features inherited from his father, and glowing black eyes that were never to lose their luster even when old and buffeted by fate and the malice of his fellow men.

He went back to Elizabethtown, determined not to be thus unceremoniously cast aside. For two more years he studied at home, following the curriculum of the College faithfully. At the ripe age of thirteen he knocked at the doors of Princeton once again; this time, however, demanding not merely admission, but entrance into the Junior class. For had he not successfully accomplished the required studies for the first two years?

His bold request was rejected, but, because of his special qualifications and his Presidential background, he was graciously permitted to enter — as a Sophomore. This was in 1769. Dr. Witherpoon was President, and the College was still officially known as the College of New-Jersey.

## CHAPTER III COLLEGE YEARS

### 1. THE INSATIABLE STUDENT

PRINCETON was a small village in those days. The College itself consisted of two buildings — Nassau Hall, the nobly proportioned eating, living and intellectual quarters of the students, and the President's home, with whose prospect in the course of construction Esther Burr had been so entirely enamored. Dense forests lay on every side, and other settlements were few and far between. But the New York-Philadelphia stage stopped overnight at the only tavern in the village, and brought regular news of the outside world, and provided a meeting-place where the young students could seek relief from the too chilly dogmas of moral philosophy.

The young boy of thirteen applied himself at once with the utmost diligence to his studies. He devoted from sixteen to eighteen hours of close application to his books. He ate and drank with Spartan abstemiousness, finding that a well-loaded stomach was conducive to mental and physical sluggishness. He was determined to keep up with the others of his class at whatever cost.

But this remarkable regime could not but undermine his constitution and lay the foundation for future disorders. His health gave way. When, however, he discovered at the end of the year that he had exceeded most of his companions in standing, he wisely decided to relax his furious pace. For the remainder of his college career he took his studies in their stride, easily and without the pale, sickly cast of the midnight lamp. Whereupon his health improved and he was able to devote himself to the other recreations that Princeton might afford.

For one thing he joined the literary societies. There were two of them, the American Whig and the Cliosophic, rivals in debate and a somewhat scurrilous paper warfare. He first became a member of the American Whig. With him in that organization were such future notables as James Madison, President of the United States, Philip Freneau, the Revolutionary poet and pamphleteer, Lighthorse Harry Lee, member of the Constitutional Convention, and Hugh Brackenridge, Judge of the Pennsylvania Supreme Court.<sup>1</sup>