

CHAPTER XVI
THE LAST STRUGGLE FOR POWER

1. ESCAPE FANTASIES

THOUGH the storm had actually broken, Burr's resilient and essentially imaginative nature seemed to throw off with ease all despondency and sense of defeat. His letters were never as gay and sprightly as they were now. The world was a cosmic jest and he studied its variegated face with ironic humor. Only when it came to Theo and his little grandson, dubbed almost immediately with a hundred endearing pet names, did he show the slightest concern. Theo had emerged an invalid from the ordeal of childbirth. It was thought that the semi-tropic Carolinian climate was too enervating for her. Burr took her back to New York with him, and she tried the waters of Saratoga and Ballston Spa for relief, but without much success. She was to remain a semi-invalid for the balance of her life. Finally she returned to Charleston and her husband, taking the little boy with her. Burr was disconsolate. New York, Washington even, became suddenly lonely and empty. Not even his deceased wife had plumbed the full depths of his devotion. This was to be achieved in all the world by but two persons — his daughter Theodosia, and his grandson, Aaron Burr Alston.

These were the deeps. The surface texture of his being imperiously demanded other consolations — the remedial pattern of sex and the society of woman. He had been a widower for over a decade, he was forty-seven, still handsome, irresistible, the Vice-President of the United States. Glimpses of little *contretemps*, of small gallantries and affairs of the heart, begin to peep through the airy persiflage of his letters. He was a splendid catch, and many a lady set herself to achieve the conquest. One at least almost succeeded, hidden forever in his detailed accounts to an amused Theodosia under the name of Celeste. But her feminine wiles, her *no* when she meant *yes*, gave the half-hearted lover his chance to escape before it was too late. "They made me laugh," wrote Theo of his letters, "yet I pity you, and have really a fellow feeling for you. Poor little Rippy, so you are mortgaged! But you bear it charmingly . . . Spasmodic love. It is really quite new

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. . . Poor Starling!"¹ And when the father announced the termination of the love affair, for all his experience a little bewildered at feminine twists and turns, the daughter knew exactly what had happened. "As to Celeste," she scolded, "she meant, from the beginning, to say that awful word — yes . . . you took it as a plump refusal, and walked off. She called you back. What more could she do? I would have seen you to Japan before I would have done so much."²

There were others too, a long line of vanished ladies, all wearing the decent anonymity of initials, of pseudonyms, yet obviously all well known to Theo, the solitary recipient of his confidences. They were a definite need, an escape fantasy, possibly, from the harassments of the outer world.

Burr continued to preside in the Senate, with a distinction which no other Vice-President has ever lent to the office. Friend and political foe alike were unanimous in their testimony as to that. Said the Federalist Senator Plumer, "Burr presides in the Senate with great ease and dignity. He always understands the subject before the Senate, states the question clearly, and confines the speakers to the point. He despises the littleness and meanness of the administration, but does not distinctly oppose them or aid us."³

As Vice-President, he could do no more than direct the course of debate, preserve order and confine speakers to the issue. On the great and pressing problems of the day — the Louisiana Purchase, foreign relations, the delicate negotiations with France, Spain and England — in all of which he was profoundly interested, he could neither act nor express an opinion even. He was an outlaw in his own Administration, a lonely figure against whom all hands were turned.

Such small solace as he could obtain was received from the always loyal College of his youth. Princeton, in the person of Governor Bloomfield of New Jersey, conferred on him the degree of Doctor of Laws, and accepted gratefully his proposal to present the College with a portrait of his father, second President of that already venerable institution.⁴ A little later, his help was required in a more tangible way. The College had been swept by fire, and Burr subscribed a substantial sum to the rebuilding fund.⁵

2. JEFFERSON IN THE SADDLE

At the beginning of 1804, political thoughts were already pointing toward the Presidential election of the following year. As to

the Republican candidate for President, there was no doubt whatever. Jefferson was the unanimous choice, and would be re-elected by an overwhelming vote. The Federalists were badly disorganized, and less than half-hearted in their efforts. Jefferson had used his office so skilfully that he had driven a huge wedge into the ranks of his opponents. He had placated and soothed wherever possible, he had wielded the patronage with telling effect; more, he had shown the jittery Federalists that Jacobinism was not the anarchical, revolutionary *bête noire* they had expected. It was hard sometimes to distinguish the policies of his Administration from those of an orthodox Federalist. The Executive powers had not been weakened by one jot; in the purchase of Louisiana "the strict constructionist" had stretched the Constitution until it literally cracked. He had gone to war with Tripoli in the best military tradition; and the Hamiltonian system — funded debt and bank, the anathemas of old — had not been disturbed in the slightest detail. Moreover, the country was prosperous. No wonder the Federalists deserted in droves to the fleshpots of Republicanism.

In the ranks of his own party, however, Jefferson was implacable. He had nothing more to fear from the Federalists, but Burr was an ever-present threat to the continued existence in power of the Virginia group. Madison, Monroe, these were the heirs-apparents.

So successful had been the campaign of vituperation and accusation against Burr that, when the Congressional leaders of the party met in informal caucus to discuss nominations, his name was barely mentioned for the Vice-Presidency. George Clinton, aged now and feeble, achieved his ultimate dream without opposition. It was part of the bargain with Jefferson for having dragged Burr down. Jefferson knew that Clinton presented no serious threat in the future against Madison, whom he was already grooming for the event of his own retirement. But Clinton's nomination opened the field in New York, where he had been Governor.

Burr cast his eyes in the direction of his own home State. There, if at all, would be the place to recoup his political fortunes. He would have to start from the beginning, and rebuild anew the careful edifice which had been shattered by the patronage and the paper warfare of his enemies. Let New York once more come into his grasp, and he would be in a position to dictate terms to those who now scorned, yet secretly feared him. Nor was the task as hopeless as it seemed. His "little band" was still active

and devoted; Tammany had stuck to him loyally and remained recalcitrant to the blandishments of the Clintons and the Livingstons. And Burr still possessed many personal friends among the New York Federalists. Their party had been smashed almost beyond repair in the recent elections, and, under the Jeffersonian dispensation nationally and the Clinton regime locally, there seemed but little difference in principles between the two parties.

Before he turned to New York, however, Burr made a last desperate attempt to settle matters with Jefferson by a personal interview. The President set down the facts of that strange conference with malicious glee. We have only his word as to what took place, and Jefferson's word, as noted before, was sometimes not quite trustworthy.

Burr, said Jefferson, called on him privately, recapitulated his history since coming to New York "a stranger" and finding "the country in the possession of two rich families," and assured him that he had accepted the Vice-Presidential nomination only "with a view to promoting my [Jefferson's] fame and advancement, and from a desire to be with me, whose company and conversation had always been fascinating to him." The Clintons and Livingstons, Burr said, had soon turned hostile and excited calumnies against him, but his attachment to Jefferson was as strong and sincere as ever. He believed, however, that "it would be for the interest of the republican cause for him to retire; that a disadvantageous schism would otherwise take place," but that he did not wish to retire under fire, as that would be construed as an avowal of defeat. Wherefore, to prove to the world that he still possessed the favor of Jefferson, he asked him to bestow some outward mark of such favor upon him for all to see.

Jefferson thought he was hinting for some appointment, and turned the conversation "to indifferent subjects." As for the published attacks, he assured Burr, forsooth, he "had noticed it but as the passing wind." In short, Jefferson bowed him out with evasions, and hastened back to his library to record how "I had never seen Colonel Burr till he came as a member of Senate. His conduct very soon inspired me with distrust. I habitually cautioned Mr. Madison against trusting him too much . . . When I destined him for a high appointment, it was out of respect for the favor he had obtained with the republican party, by his extraordinary exertions and successes in the New York election in 1800."⁶

It was in any event a most extraordinary interview, and, at the best, betrayed the desperation with which Burr surveyed the

future. In earlier years his proud spirit would never have humbled itself to beg any favor, no matter how slight, from one whom he knew to be his inveterate enemy. And he had humiliated himself in vain.

Burr now turned definitely to New York as his sole hope for salvation. The gubernatorial election was to take place in the spring, and his friends proceeded at once to whip up waning enthusiasms in his behalf. His enemies hailed his approach with furious activity of their own. Already had they prepared their lines. De Witt Clinton had resigned, after a short period, as United States Senator, and General Armstrong was returned again to the Senate. The Clintons and the Livingstons were shifting their pawns about with remarkable agility. Whereupon De Witt Clinton was promptly appointed Mayor of the City of New York, and as promptly filled all city posts with political hirelings in an effort to break the power of Tammany. The Manhattan Bank was mobilized and all its resources poured into the impending battle. Should Burr win, not all the aid of the national administration could save the Clintons from ruin.

When Burr had presented himself for the fatal interview with Jefferson, the latter had already been warned of his plans by De Witt Clinton. "A certain gentleman [Burr] was to leave this place yesterday morning," he wrote. "He has been very active in procuring information as to his probable success for governor at the next election. This, I believe is his intention at present, although it is certain that if the present Governor will consent to be a candidate, he will prevail by an immense majority." This was before George Clinton had been offered the Vice-Presidential nomination. "Perhaps a letter from you may be of singular service."⁷

But Jefferson refused to commit himself in writing. He still preferred to work through subterranean channels. "I should think it indeed a serious misfortune," he replied, "should a change in the administration of your government be hazarded before its present principles be well established through all its parts; yet on reflection you will be sensible that the delicacy of my situation, considering who may be competitors, forbids my intermeddling even so far as to write the letter you suggest. I can therefore only brood in silence over my secret wishes."⁸

Jefferson had assured Burr in their interview that as in the past he had "never interfered directly or indirectly" to influence any election, so, he said, "in the election now coming on, I was observing the same conduct, held no councils with anybody re-

specting it, nor suffered any one to speak to me on the subject."⁹ In spite of this assurance, he found no qualms, however, as he himself admitted later, in sending a warning posthaste to the Clintons advising them of Burr's proposed plans and putting them on their guard.¹⁰ His vaunted neutrality was a sham.

3. BURR FOR GOVERNOR

The Clintons and Livingstons were in command of the Republican machinery of the State. They nominated Chancellor Lansing, an able, trustworthy man. At first he accepted; then, on February 18, 1804, he threw consternation into the hearts of his supporters by publicly announcing his declination on the ground that he had accepted solely in the interests of establishing a union of factions, but that "subsequent events have induced me to believe that my hopes on this subject were too sanguine."

These "subsequent events" were the upsurge of considerable Burr sentiment. In New York City, the Burrrites, in spite of Clinton's exertions, were very powerful. In almost every county of the State distinguished Republicans declared openly for his candidacy. In Dutchess and Orange Counties sentiment was particularly strong in his favor. On February 18th, the very date of Lansing's declination, the Burr forces met at the Tontine Coffee House in Albany, and, amid scenes of enthusiasm, formally nominated Burr for Governor. New York City held its meeting two days later to the same effect. A ticket was drawn up, and Oliver Phelps of Ontario County chosen as his running-mate for Lieutenant-Governor.¹¹

The Clinton faction grew alarmed. Burr was stronger than they had suspected, and they were still without a nominee. On February 20th they called another caucus and hastily proposed Morgan Lewis, Chief Justice of the State Supreme Court, and a member of the Livingston clan — and he as hastily accepted.

Burr knew, running as an independent Republican alone, that he could not hope to defeat the regular Republican machine, entrenched as it was in patronage and the organization of government. His only hope lay in attracting the Federalists to his standard. They were disorganized, hopelessly routed. They had not even a candidate to offer. No one could be found to accept the burden of sure defeat.

But the moribund figure of Alexander Hamilton rose once again to block his path, to put the last link in the chain with which his Republican enemies had almost surrounded him. Hamilton

had been sulking in his tent, a discredited leader. Now he roused himself to do battle for a last time with the man he hated above all others. It was more than a matter of mere personal emotions, however. It was a bid to regain the commanding leadership in his own party, that overwhelming prestige he had once enjoyed. Revolt, long muttered, had blazed forth. He had driven Federalism into the ground with his tactics, grumbled certain New England members, erstwhile meek and subservient. New issues had arisen, involving New England closely, and Hamilton was paying them no heed. It was time, they declared openly, to shift the mantle of leadership to one more capable of command. But of that more anon.

The Federalists met secretly in Albany to determine whether they, as a party, should support Burr, or run their own candidate. Hamilton attended with a written statement of his views. He descanted at length on the general untrustworthiness of Aaron Burr, repeated all the old accusations, and begged the assembled Federalists rather to vote for Lansing, whose declination was still not known, to vote for the Devil himself, if need be, than for the independent candidate.¹²

The Federalists were unimpressed. They were growing weary of Hamilton's obsession. Only through the support of Burr could they hope to regain even the crumbs of office once more. Gaylord Griswold, Federalist Congressman from Herkimer County, even went so far as to write a letter for publication, in which he urged all his friends to vote for Burr, charging Hamilton's opposition to a "personal resentment towards Burr."¹³ There were other forces at work, too, of which Hamilton was as yet unaware — notably the New Englanders, with secret aims of their own.

The issue was joined. Morgan Lewis, regular Republican, against Aaron Burr, independent Republican, with the avowed support of most of the Federalist party. Senator Plumer, who had noted on February 10th that Burr had no chance for success, on February 28th sang another tune. "Burr yesterday again took his seat in the Senate. His journey to New York was, I presume, necessary to make arrangements for the approaching gubernatorial election. His prospect of success increases; many of the federalists in that State will exert themselves in his favor."¹⁴

Meanwhile, outside events concurred. Louisiana had been annexed — a dangerous addition, thought the Federalists, to Republican territory — and Jefferson was proceeding inexorably to the impeachment of Federalist judges. In only this had he shown

himself at all revolutionary: in his constant aversion to the entire Judiciary system. Impeachment was his remedy.

To his plans the Federalist Congressmen from New England could at first only interpose despair. Their ranks had crumbled, the Virginians were in the saddle, and in the attack on the Judiciary they saw only the ultimate destruction of all sacrosanct property rights, of freedom itself.

Despair gave way to secret conclaves, in the course of which four New England Senators — Pickering of Massachusetts, Plumer of New Hampshire, Tracy and Hillhouse of Connecticut — together with Roger Griswold, Congressman from Connecticut, and others from the House, agreed that desperate times demanded desperate measures. In short, New England, now at a disadvantage within the Union, must declare the compact of the States at an end, and forthwith secede. At once the conspirators stirred into a bustle of frenetic activity. They wrote to those in their respective States whom they felt most likely to heed, sounding them out, apprising them of their plans. Pickering, the head and front of the movement, wrote George Cabot that the separation "must begin in Massachusetts. The proposition would be welcomed in Connecticut; and could we doubt of New Hampshire? But New York must be associated; and how is her concurrence to be obtained? She must be made the centre of the confederacy. Vermont and New Jersey would follow of course, and Rhode Island of necessity."¹⁵

This, then, was the very heart of the problem. Without New York, the conspiracy must be doomed to defeat. *With* New York, it would flourish as the green bay tree. So the plotters turned to Aaron Burr. He was the key to the situation. He was an outlaw in his own party; his resentment would make him amenable. With him as an ally, New York might be captured and made an integral part of a Federalist nation.

They sounded him out in Washington early in 1804. Timothy Pickering, James Hillhouse, William Plumer and others dined with him. Hillhouse, watchful of the effect, declared that the United States "would soon form two distinct & separate governments." Others expressed themselves in similar fashion. Burr participated in the conversation with his usual easy grace. Plumer, well pleased, took home with him the impression that Burr "not only thought *such an event would take place — but that it was necessary it should.*" Unfortunately, in the silence of his own study, when Plumer tried to analyze Burr's remarks, he found "nothing that he said that necessarily implied his approbation

of Mr. Hillhouse's observations." Whereupon he became attentive to Burr's after talk and discovered "perhaps no man's language was ever more apparently explicit, & at the same time so covert & indefinite." ¹⁶ Which may be ascribed to Plumer's disgruntlement at not having been able to pin Burr down to an acceptance of their plans.

The conspirators did not give up, however. Burr was most essential to them. The old Essex Junto—George Cabot, Fishc. Ames, Stephen Higginson, Theophilus Parsons—as well as Hamilton, were all opposed to the idea. They admitted the premises, but denied that secession was the proper remedy.

Pickering wrote rather optimistically to Rufus King that "the Federalists here in general anxiously desire the election of Mr. Burr to the chair of New York; for they despair of a present ascendancy of the Federal party. Mr. Burr alone, we think, can break your Democratic phalanx; and we anticipate much good from his success." ¹⁷

Roger Griswold was more practical. He tried to ascertain Burr's views, but obtained little information. "He speaks in the most bitter terms of the Virginia faction," Griswold told Oliver Wolcott, "and of the necessity of a union at the northward to resist it; but what the ultimate objects are which he would propose, I do not know." But Griswold was determined to find out. "I have engaged to call on the Vice-President as I pass through New York," he continued. "He said he wished very much to see me, and to converse, but his situation in this place did not admit of it, and he begged me to call on him at New York . . . Indeed, I do not see how he can avoid a full explanation with Federal men. His prospects must depend on the union of the Federalists with his friends, and it is certain that his views must extend much beyond the office of Governor of New York. He has the spirit of ambition and revenge to gratify, and can do but little with his 'little band' alone." ¹⁸

The interview took place on April 4th in the house of Burr in New York. But all Griswold's insistence could elicit nothing further from Burr than that "he must go on democratically to obtain the government; that, if he succeeded, he should administer it in a manner that would be satisfactory to the Federalists. In respect to the affairs of the nation, Burr said that the Northern States must be governed by Virginia or govern Virginia, and that there was no middle course; that the Democratic members of Congress from the East were in this sentiment, some of those from

A warning to Libellers.

AARON BURR is closeted with his satellites in dark divan. He is using every wicked art to promote his own election. He is surrounded by a little party of discontented men, who are attempting to destroy our republican administration, with a view that they may procure offices. He has employed detestable hirelings to vilify and abuse our most faithful public characters. Can we pardon the abuse which the villainous wretch, Aristides, has heaped upon our worthy President, THOMAS JEFFERSON, by representing him as a weak and fickle visionary; in fine as an idiot, incompetent to preside over the affairs of a great nation? a more formidable charge could not have been advanced against this illustrious character, for it is as fatal to desert a cause from weakness as to betray it by treachery. Aaron Burr and his disgraceful associates have exceeded all bounds—they have carried calumny, slander, and detraction to a greater height than was ever done before. They have established a News-Paper for no other purpose than to abuse private characters. No men are so vulnerable as themselves. If decency would permit, I could tell such tales of all of them as would put them down for ever. I shall forbear. But let the disgraceful debauchee who permitted an infamous prostitute to insult and embitter the dying moments of his injured wife; let him look home. Degraded as he is, beyond contempt in the opinion of all good men. Vain Dotard! Does he aspire to public honor? Let this hint suffice—Let it shew what I could relate—I know their rottenness of characters, and could torture the very marrow of their bones.

"I could" some tales "unfold, whose lightest word would harrow up thy soul; freeze thy young blood; make thy two eyes like stars, start from their spheres; thy knotty and combined locks to part, and each particular hair to stand an end like quills upon the fretful Porcupine."

Basilisk beware! an eye keen as the lightning—A voice powerful as the thunder of the heavens is near thee—Revoke not the power which can crush thee in an instant. At present it beholds thee with sovereign disdain and with contempt ineffable—Child of the dust—Little Puppet of the day—It can sport with thee—It has a merciful spirit; but there is a point of endurance, beyond which, it is not to be controuled.

SYLPHID.

Courtesy of The New York Public Library

BURR-LEWIS CAMPAIGN POSTER, 1804

THE following hand-bill was circulated in the year 1801, by the Federal party. It is now re-published for the gratification of those Federal gentlemen who are now supporting "this Cataline." The original may be seen at the office of the Citizen:

Aaron Burr !

At length this Cataline stands confessed in all his villainy—His insatiable thirst of the Constitution of the United States has long been displayed in one steady, undeviating course of hostility to every measure which the solid interests of the Union demand—His political perfidiousness and intrigues are also now pretty generally known, and even his own party have avowed their jealousy and fear of a character, which, to great talents adds the deepest dissimulation and an entire devotion to self-interest, and self-aggrandizement—But there is a new trait in this man's character, to be added to the view of an insidious traitor—His abandoned profligacy, and the numerous unhappy wretches who have fallen victims to his artful and but too successful deceptions, have indeed been long known to those whom similar habits of vice, or the amiable offices of humanity have led to the wretched haunts of female prostitution—But it is time to draw aside the curtain in which he has thus far been permitted to conceal himself by the forbearance of his enemies, by the anxious intercession of his friends, and more by his own crafty contrivances and unbounded prodigality.

It is time to tear away the veil that hides this monster, and lay open a scene of misery, at which every heart must shudder. Fellow Citizens, read a tale of truth, which must harrow up your sensibility, and excite your warmest resentment. It is, indeed, a tale of truth, and, but for wounding, too deeply, the already lacerated feelings of a general family, would

be authenticated by all the formalities of an oath. I do not mean to tell you of the late celebrated courtesan N—, nor U—, nor S—, nor of half a dozen more whom first his intrigues have ruined, and his satiated brutality has afterwards thrown on the town, the prey of disease, of misery, and wretchedness—It is to a more recent act, that I call your attention, and I hope it will create in every heart, the same abhorrence with which mine is filled.

When Mr. Burr last went to the city of Washington about 2 months ago, to take the oath of office, and his seat in the August senate of the U. States, he visited the daughter of a respectable tradesman there, & had the cruelty to persuade her to forsake her native town, her friends and family, and to follow him to New-York. She did so—and she is now in KEEPLE in Partitions. Vice, however, sooner or later, meets its merited punishment. Justice, though sometimes slow, is sure. The villain has not long enjoyed this triumph over female weakness. The father of the girl has at length after a laborious and painful search, found out the author of his child's ruin, and his family's misfortune.—He is now in this city, and assassines will soon light on the guilty head.—Fellow citizens, I leave you to make your own comments on this complicated scene of misery and vice.—I will conclude with a single observation.—Is that party at whose head this monster, who directs all their motions and intrigues, all their nefarious schemes worthy of your support?

New York, some of the leaders in Jersey, and likewise in Pennsylvania." 19 And with that Griswold had to be content.

Burr's interview with Griswold cannot be tortured into an expression of approval of secessionist sentiments. He welcomed Federalist support, it is true, but he must go on *democratically* to obtain the government. He wished the North to govern Virginia, not *vice versa*, but "there was no middle course." A clear warning, it seems, against all thoughts of disunion. Yet it is persistently alleged that Burr had joined the New England Conspiracy, and would, if elected, have piloted the Northern States to secession.

The campaign was both active and acrimonious. Handbills fluttered in profusion, the newspapers roared, Cheatham accused Burr of keeping a seraglio, of being "a disgraceful debauchee who permitted an infamous prostitute to insult and embitter the dying moments of his injured wife." 20 With these assertions ringing in their ears, the electors of the State of New York marched to the polls.

When the votes were counted, it was seen that Morgan Lewis had been elected over Burr by a vote of 30,829 to 22,139. New York City gave Burr a small majority of 100 votes, but the tide upstate swept strongly for Lewis. The Republican party had been thoroughly poisoned against him—only his immediate adherents supported him within its ranks—while the unceasing opposition of Hamilton had alienated a sufficient number of Federalists to insure his defeat. The debacle in New York had shattered all Burr's dreams of rehabilitation. Though Vice-President of the United States, the future held only a political blank. His enemies had finally triumphed.

Courtesy of The New York Historical Society

A CONTEMPORARY ELECTION BROADSIDE, 1804