

CHAPTER XX  
WESTERN JOURNEY

1. HOUSEBOAT ON THE OHIO

ON March 29, 1805, Burr was writing Theo from Philadelphia, "In ten or twelve days I shall be on my way westward. . . . the objects of his journey, not mere curiosity, or pour passer le temps, may lead me to Orleans, and perhaps farther."<sup>1</sup> Mexico, in other words.

To Alston he wrote, "In New-York I am to be disfranchised, and in New-Jersey hanged. Having substantial objections to both, I shall not for the present, hazard either, but shall seek another country. You will not, from this, conclude that I have become passive, or disposed to submit tamely to the machinations of a banditti. If you should you would greatly err."<sup>2</sup>

On April 10, 1805, Burr started out from Philadelphia on his long-anticipated Western "tour." His first objective was Pittsburgh, to which he journeyed on horseback in the company of Mr. and Mrs. Gabriel Shaw. There he found a "floating house," which he had ordered in advance, "sixty feet by fourteen, containing dining-room, kitchen with fireplace, and two bedrooms: roofed from stem to stern; steps go up, and a walk on the top the whole length; glass windows, etc. This edifice costs one hundred and thirty-three dollars."<sup>3</sup> With this vehicle he intended floating down the Ohio and Mississippi to New Orleans, making certain stops on the way.

He arrived on April 29th and departed the next day. Wilkinson was to have joined him there, on his way to St. Louis to assume his new duties as Governor of the Louisiana Territory, but he was delayed, and Burr went on alone. Thirty-six hours later, he caught up with Matthew Lyon, ex-Vermont Congressman, and settled now in Kentucky, who had left Pittsburgh by barge the day before him. They lashed their boats together and proceeded down the river. Lyon was to depose later that Wilkinson had inquired of him early in 1804 what could be done for Burr. Lyon had suggested that he go to Nashville to practice law, and from there achieve a seat in Congress. Wilkinson thought it was a good scheme, but Burr was not at all enthusiastic over the prospect. In-

stead, according to Lyon, Burr wished him to broach the subject of an embassy to Jefferson. Lyon refused to intervene.<sup>4</sup>

On the way, they stopped at an island in the middle of the Ohio River, some two miles from Parkersburg, and no great distance from Marietta, Ohio. This island and its occupants were destined to play a very considerable part in the events of the next year or two. Harman Blennerhassett, its owner, was of Irish birth. Falling heir to an estate of some \$100,000, he abandoned his native land and his legal profession, married an Englishwoman, and took ship to America in 1796. Traveling at a leisurely sightseeing pace, he discovered the Ohio and the island. He fell in love with their natural beauties, purchased the island, and proceeded to make it the show place of the Western country. His home was in the palatial English style, on a slope fronting the river. Around it he made wide, smooth lawns, planted gardens in profusion, with long rows of shrubs and hedges in the English fashion, and settled down to play the role of an English country gentleman in the heart of the wilderness.

The man himself was six feet tall, slender, slightly stooped, near-sighted, with a prominent nose, timid, and somewhat scholarly. He loved to play at chemistry, astronomy, and the sciences in general, and he performed acceptably on the violin. While the grandeur with which he had surrounded himself had taken some \$50,000 from his inheritance, he still had enough left to run his manor and live in style — at least for a while.<sup>5</sup>

Burr evidently had met him before, and quite likely, in his desperate need for funds, had already turned his attention to the eccentric Irishman. But Blennerhassett was away in the East when Burr arrived, and it devolved on his wife to do the honors. In the short space of an afternoon, Mrs. Blennerhassett became completely fascinated by the very fascinating ex-Vice-President, and, under deft and diplomatic questioning, disclosed much of their private affairs and financial entanglements. Burr pigeonholed the information and left, after dinner, with many courteous protestations of regard.

He arrived in Cincinnati on May 11, 1805, where he found Jonathan Dayton and Senator John Smith — both by appointment — and several old army acquaintances. The West was full of ex-army officers. It is not to be doubted that he expatiated to them of his plans for leading a special expedition against Spain and her colonial possessions. Perhaps he hinted even of Mexico. This proselytizing was indeed one of the chief purposes of this lengthy journey. It is also quite likely that his old army friends responded

with considerable enthusiasm. The West hated Spain, and Burr's military talents were well known to them. But the proposals, it seems, were conditioned wholly upon the understanding that the United States would soon declare war upon Spain. Burr had made that quite plain. Such, at least, was later to be the unanimous contention of all those who had joined the proceedings. Dayton, naturally, continued to stir up favorable sentiment after Burr's departure; he was one of the prime movers.

There were other matters discussed at these conferences besides a warlike descent on Spanish territory. That would take place in the future, and depended on certain contingencies. Other schemes were in the air, more peaceful in character, in which the participants were equally interested. Burr, Wilkinson, Dayton, Smith, John Brown.

The Ohio River broke at Louisville into a swirl of rapids that proved a serious obstacle to navigation. At low water it was necessary to unload the cargoes of vessels from either end of the river, transport them painfully around the rough passage, and reload where smooth water began again. A canal had been discussed for some time as a remedy for this situation. Louisville objected — that village profited immensely from the break in navigation. But various land speculators, whose holdings along the river would benefit from a canal, joined forces to press the issue. General Benjamin Hovey, of New York, petitioned Congress on January 17, 1805, for a grant of 25,000 acres in Indiana for himself and his associates, on receipt of which they would engage to build the canal. The Senate referred the petition to a committee — Dayton of New Jersey, Brown of Kentucky, and Smith of Ohio. They reported favorably on the proposition, but Congress defeated the bill. Whereupon the associates turned to the Indiana Legislature for the requisite charter. The triumvirate on the Senate Committee, however, had themselves become interested in the idea. They joined forces with the original proponents. Burr, in the Vice-Presidential chair, had noted the proceedings in the Senate, and he, too, was interested. It was without doubt one of the matters that took him West at this particular time. For the new Indiana Legislature was meeting for the first time in June, 1805.

The Indiana Canal Company was actually incorporated in August, with a capitalization of a million dollars, and the usual clauses for the construction and operation of a canal. But there were certain other curious clauses in the charter relating to monied ventures which were strangely reminiscent of another charter, viz., that one which had been granted to the Manhattan Company

in New York some years before. The suspicion deepens to certainty on a perusal of the names of the Board of Directors for the initial year. Jonathan Dayton, John Brown, Davis Floyd, Benjamin Hovey and Aaron Burr.<sup>6</sup>

The canal was never built by this company — it was finally to be constructed on the Kentucky side by a different corporation — but this failure should not be charged to Burr. He was soon enough to become involved in a glut of situations that drove all thoughts of the corporation he had sponsored from his mind. But the Company *did* set up a bank possessing the power of emitting paper currency — which was certainly Burr's idea; and it was later claimed by opponents of the Company that this had been its real purpose from the very beginning.<sup>7</sup>

The groundwork for this scheme having been laid, Burr's next stop was Louisville, where he took to land to avoid the rapids, and traveled by horseback to Frankfort, in Kentucky, which he reached May 20th. Here he sojourned with Senator John Brown — also by appointment. Both the canal and Spanish projects were discussed. Then he met John Adair, United States Senator, probably at Lexington, to whom Wilkinson, following on Burr's trail, and only a few days behind, had sent a note ahead by messenger. "I was to have introduced my friend Burr to you," he wrote, "but in this I failed by accident. He understands your merits, and *reckons* on you. Prepare to visit me, and I will tell you all. We must have a peep at the unknown world beyond."<sup>8</sup> Very definitely this points to far lands — Mexico. Long afterward, Adair declared that "the intentions of Colonel Burr . . . were to prepare and lead an expedition into Mexico, predicated on a war between the two governments; without a war he knew he could do nothing. On this war taking place he calculated with certainty, as well from the policy of the measure at this time as from the positive assurances of Wilkinson, who seemed to have the power to force it in his own hands."<sup>9</sup>

This was close to the truth. Wilkinson was on his way to become Governor as well as General. His forces were soon to oppose the Spanish across the Sabine River, a very contentious boundary. If Jefferson were reluctant to proceed to extremities, it required only a "border incident" to force the issue. Already Wilkinson and Burr must have discussed the matter, and Burr was now taking it up with Adair.

From Lexington, Burr went on to Nashville, Tennessee. The fiery Andrew Jackson, General of Militia, admirer of Aaron Burr, and boundless in his contempt for the "Spanish Don," was the

next port of call. Everywhere Burr had been received with profuse cordiality, hospitality, and expressions of respect. The West remembered his activities in its behalf, he had been Vice-President of the United States, and his duel with Hamilton, which had damned him in the effete East, was here only an evidence of his personal courage. Hamilton, moreover, had been somewhat of a Devil in the rude Western mythology, just as Jefferson, with his democratic principles, was something of a God. It is difficult to believe that Burr, after this Western journey, could possibly have been possessed of any illusions as to the willingness of the West to secede from the Union. He was too shrewd a man not to have observed the almost unanimous sentiment for Jefferson and Democracy. Wilkinson himself, in the earlier turbulent days, when Spain held the Mississippi and New Orleans, and the Federalist East neglected its Western possessions shamefully, had not been able to whip up much enthusiasm for that particular project.

But if Burr's reception heretofore had been cordial, in Nashville it was overwhelming. He arrived there on May 29th, and was promptly taken in tow by Andrew Jackson. From miles around, the populace thronged to see the man of whom it was already rumored that he was prepared to scourge the contemptible Spaniard out of America. A great parade was organized in his honor, music blared and cannon roared; there was feasting and dancing, and he was compelled to deliver a speech to the cheering crowds. They clamored that he lead them at once against Spain, and he was forced to moderate their transports. He was in truth the man of the hour. Jackson, bursting with pride over this "lion" in his Hermitage, offered his services, then, in the future, at any time. Burr accepted them gracefully, but said the time was not yet.

To Theo, Burr merely wrote (he was keeping a journal of the trip for her private delectation) that "I have been received with much hospitality and kindness, and could stay a month with pleasure; but General Andrew Jackson having provided us a boat, we shall set off on Sunday, the 2nd of June."<sup>10</sup>

In fact, he left on June 3rd, floated down the Cumberland River to the place where it emptied into the Ohio, a distance of about 220 miles, and there found his "ark" waiting. On the 6th he reached Fort Massac, sixteen miles below, where Wilkinson and his entourage, come straight down the Ohio, were expecting his arrival. They spent four days at the fort together; then they parted. Burr was furnished by Wilkinson with "an elegant barge, sails, colours, and ten oars, with a sergeant, and ten able, faithful hands" for the balance of his journey down the rivers to New

Orleans, while the General, after some delay, proceeded alone to St. Louis to assume his gubernatorial duties.<sup>11</sup>

For seven days they rowed swiftly and uneventfully down the Ohio, and along the broad and muddy waters of the Mississippi, until they reached Natchez on June 17th, a distance of nearly eight hundred miles. Here Burr was surprised to find a substantial community, whose planters, many of them men of education and refinement, entertained him with lavish hospitality. A short stay, and he pushed on, until, on June 25th, his men rested on their oars. They had reached New Orleans, the first goal of this particular journey.

That turbulent, cosmopolitan town welcomed him with an enthusiasm which surpassed anything he had before experienced. Not even Nashville's reception could be compared with this. The Deputies had already returned from their unsatisfactory mission in Washington, and the one note of praise they had brought back with them had been for the sympathetic Vice-President of the United States, the only man in all the East who had understood their special problems. All classes of society joined to do him honor. He had with him also certain letters of introduction, furnished by Wilkinson. One was addressed to Daniel Clark, wealthiest merchant of the town, whose eyes were steadily fixed on the almost fabulous trade of Mexico. "This will be delivered to you by Colonel Burr," it read, "whose worth you know well how to estimate. If the persecutions of a great and honorable man, can give title to generous attentions, he has claims to all your civilities, and all your services. You cannot oblige me more than by such conduct; and I pledge my life to you, it will not be misapplied. To him I refer you for many things improper to letter, and which he will not say to any other."<sup>12</sup>

There was another letter, addressed to Casa Calvo, Spanish Commissioner, still lingering unaccountably in New Orleans. Wilkinson requested him to "serve this gentleman, he is my friend . . . Your great family interests will promote the view of Colonel Burr and the great interest of your country will be served by following his advice . . . Do as I advise you and you will soon send to the devil that boastful idiot W. C. C. Claiborne."<sup>13</sup>

With this letter, the stew of many diverse and marvelous ingredients begins to thicken. Wilkinson, in New Orleans, could no longer withhold his identification with Burr's projects, as he had in the East. It was necessary therefore to sugarcoat the pill for Spanish consumption, inasmuch as he did not intend to lose that lucrative source of supplies unless it were to his advantage. Ac-

cordingly, Burr was being presented to the Spaniards as his confederate, ready to do Spain's bidding. In short, he intended to arouse the old cupidity for a Western empire which would include Kentucky, Tennessee, and the return of Louisiana. Thereby Spanish suspicions would be lulled as to the real objects of Burr's descent upon New Orleans. With this in mind, the later approach to Yrujo in Washington and Philadelphia becomes more explicable.

To Clark, however, and the members of the Mexican Association, another facet was displayed. This was the true picture. The conquest and liberation of Mexico, with consequent free and unlimited trade for the merchants of New Orleans; the subjugation of West Florida and its attachment, politically as well as commercially, to themselves. It is at this point that the only doubt as to Burr's, and Wilkinson's, somewhat divergent courses may be entertained.

The newly sliced Territory of Orleans, comprising the city and the contiguous country, was not happy over its transfer to the United States. The dominant Creoles had not liked Spanish government, it is true, but the American officialdom which had descended on them, in the person of Claiborne of Tennessee, was not to be borne. He was well-meaning, perhaps, but stupid, and possessed of that peculiar American talent for regarding American institutions, system of education, manners, customs, etc., as God's own peculiar largesse, and all others as foreign and therefore inferior. The Creoles were a proud, cultured race, who found their sensibilities, their methods, their religion even, exquisitely exacerbated by the stupid, unmeaning grossness of the American Governor. There is no doubt that in 1805 they would have preferred independence under the protecting egis of England or France to their present humiliating state of subjection to a remote commonwealth. And perhaps Burr was considering this, too, — it is hard to say from the available evidence. If he were, however, it was a secondary consideration — to be ticketed for the future. First there was Mexico — and possibly West Florida. To subjugate these required not only the aid of New Orleans, but of the West also. Independence for the Orleans Territory, though it was to be dangled as a bait for British, French and Spanish gold, was a remote contingency; certainly not by forcible means. Negotiation, perhaps, when Burr ruled in Mexico; not otherwise.

In any event, Burr was feted and dined and given the keys to the city. He met the Mayor, John Watkins, and James Workman, Judge of the New Orleans County Court, both members of the

Mexican Association; he met and conferred with Daniel Clark; he renewed old acquaintance with Edward Livingston and talked to Judge Prevost, his step-son; he met Americans and Creoles alike, society of high and low degree; and delightfully, he was invited to visit the Ursuline nuns, where "all was gayety, wit, and sprightliness" and man of the world and those withdrawn felt the reciprocal tug of each other's charm.<sup>14</sup> For the Catholic authorities of New Orleans were ready to support any scheme pointing to the independence of Mexico, and they promptly appointed three priests as Burr's agents to the secret leaders of the revolutionists. And Burr saw Casa Calvo, handed him Wilkinson's letter, and exercised all his talents to soothe the Spaniard's natural fears.<sup>15</sup>

## 2. YRUJO STARTS A BACKFIRE

On July 10th, having accomplished the chief purposes of this preliminary tour and survey of the situation, Burr turned eastward to carry his plans into effect. He had good reason to be satisfied with the results already obtained, even though he had been unable to penetrate into Mexico. Everywhere he had been hailed with acclaim, everywhere he had found the populace eager to be led against the Spaniard. The commencement of hostilities would be the signal of a great outpouring, and Burr intended to lead the irregulars. The Regular Army was under Wilkinson's command. It required, therefore, only a forward move by the Administration, or, failing that, the establishment of a *fait accompli* by Wilkinson.

Reluctantly Burr tore himself away from New Orleans. He had thoughts even of settling permanently in that coming metropolis of the South. Daniel Clark furnished him with horses, and he rode overland to Natchez, where he tarried nearly a week. Then on through an untracked wilderness, most of the way on foot, following the line of division between West Florida and the United States, along the Yazoo, through "a vile country, destitute of springs and running water — think of drinking the nasty puddle-water, covered with green scum, and full of animalculae." Then across the Tennessee, "a clear, beautiful, magnificent river," about "forty miles below the muscle shoals," and on to Nashville and General Jackson once more, arriving safe, if much fatigued, on August 6th.<sup>16</sup> It was a Homeric journey.

Nashville outdid its former tremendous welcome. A great public dinner was held, at which Burr and Jackson appeared arm in arm, to the accolade of cheers and the fluttering of feminine hearts.

On August 13th he was still "lounging at the house of General Jackson, once a lawyer, after a judge, now a planter; a man of intelligence, and one of those prompt, frank, ardent souls whom I love to meet."<sup>17</sup>

Finally he summoned fortitude to his aid and went on to Lexington, retracing his earlier steps; then, on August 31st, he was once more the guest of John Brown at Frankfort. The following day he doubled back again, this time to proceed to St. Louis, and General James Wilkinson. There was much to be discussed, notes to be compared, and the future to be plotted.

But at St. Louis he found that certain clouds had appeared on a hitherto spotless horizon. Wilkinson had been hinting vaguely to certain of his officers of schemes in hand whereby they could recoup their fortunes, and volunteering wholly unnecessary information to the effect that "a military government was best" for Louisiana, that the French inhabitants could not understand a republican form, and that the Americans in the Territory were "a turbulent set, the mere emptyings of jails, or fugitives from justice." Major Bruff, one of those thus approached, made it plain that he would have no part in any such transaction.<sup>18</sup> Wilkinson was not always seeing eye to eye with Burr; many times the cross-currents of their thoughts and separate actions were clashing — more and more, as time wore on. In any event, this episode made Wilkinson pause and reflect.

There was another, more serious, and doubtless the one that finally determined the valiant General to jettison his confederate and seek his advantage elsewhere. Yrujo had not been idle during Burr's absence. It was not enough that he had warned all Spanish officials to be on their guard. He was alarmed, in the existing delicate state of affairs between the United States and Spain, over the prospect that Burr's proposed filibuster against Mexico might start a conflagration which would sweep Spain out of the Americas. To avoid this, he skilfully started a backfire which would discredit Burr and his aims completely. Stephen Minor, an American in the pay of Spain — even as Wilkinson — was given instructions. Minor was well worth his salary. He industriously circulated rumors in New Orleans, in Natchez, in all the Territory, that Burr's real purpose was to separate the Western country from the Union — by force if necessary — and to unite them all in one great Empire with the Spanish possessions.<sup>19</sup> It was this rumor, traveling east and north, gathering strength and fabulous accretions on the way, that brought about Burr's eventual downfall. The report arrived at St. Louis almost simultaneously with Burr, and was suffi-

ciently ominous in its texture to cause Wilkinson not only to reflect, but to change the entire purport of his own private plans with the agility of a molting snake.

Daniel Clark sent him the news, in a letter dated September 7th, bearing under its veneer of airy lightness an unmistakable note of warning. "Many absurd and wild reports, are circulated here [New Orleans]," he wrote, "and have reached the ears of the officers of the late Spanish government, respecting our ex-vice president. You are spoken of as his right hand man; and even I am now supposed to be of consequence enough to combine with generals and vice-presidents . . . Entre nous, I believe that Minor, of Natchez, has a great part in this business . . . he is in the pay of Spain, and wishes to convince them he is much their friend . . . Were I sufficiently intimate with Mr. Burr, and knew where to direct a line to him, I should take the liberty of writing him . . . The tale is a horrid one, if well told. Kentucky, Tennessee, the state of Ohio, the four territories on the Mississippi and Ohio, with part of Georgia and Carolina, are to be bribed with the plunder of the Spanish countries west of us, to separate from the union."<sup>20</sup>

Wilkinson became alarmed. If the United States, as well as Spain, was aroused against Burr, and his own name involved, he was a ruined man. From this time on, he definitely determined to dissociate himself completely from Burr. Already a new plan was germinating in his fertile brain — treacherous, a base betrayal of friendship, it is true — but calculated at once to save his own skin, and to achieve a measure of profit from the wreckage. This, however, was to be a last resort.

In the meantime, he seems to have said nothing to Burr of Clark's disturbing letter, though it must have arrived while Burr was still in St. Louis. For Burr did not leave until September 19th; the letter was dated September 7th, and was sufficiently important to be sent by fast messenger. The average time of passage was ten days. It was better, he thought, to keep his confederate temporarily in ignorance, while he decided on his own course. It was not until November, some two months later, that he wrote to Burr about it, now safely in the East. Burr replied on January 6, 1806, that "your friend [Clark] suspects without reason the person [Minor] named in his letter to you. I love the society of that person; but surely I could never be guilty of the folly of confiding to one of his levity anything which I wished not to be repeated. Pray do not disturb yourself with such nonsense."<sup>21</sup>

And it was not until March 8, 1806, that Wilkinson answered

Clark with a scornful reference to "the tale of a tub of Burr," and dropped the subject forthwith.<sup>22</sup>

Meanwhile Wilkinson had conceived an expedient to get rid of Burr. Evidently he pulled a long face — not disclosing the source of his distrust — and advised Burr in friendly fashion that perhaps it would be wiser to drop their plans temporarily, that the time was not ripe, etc. etc. In the meantime he would be glad to help Burr get back into political life. In fact, he would furnish him with a letter that would do the trick. Which he did.

Burr, unknowing of the background of alarm and meditated dissociation, accepted the letter in good faith, though, from the sequel, he had no intention of presenting it. There was no reason that he could see for Wilkinson's sudden weak-kneedness.

The letter was addressed to Governor William Henry Harrison, of the Indiana Territory, at Vincennes. "I will demand from your friendship a boon in its influence co-extensive with the Union; a boon, perhaps, on which the Union may much depend," Wilkinson wrote darkly, "a boon which may serve me, may serve you, and disserve neither . . . If you ask, What is this important boon which I so earnestly crave? I will say to you, return the bearer to the councils of our country, where his talents and abilities are all-important at the present moment."<sup>23</sup> A boon, indeed, to Wilkinson. With Burr peacefully settled in Indiana, and returned to Washington as a Congressman, he could boast to Spain that it was his influence alone which had turned the dreadful energies of that infamous conspirator, Aaron Burr, from all thoughts of Spanish conquest. Naturally, such notable services would be requited with a special honorarium. In the event that the storm broke from the American side, he could then claim — as in fact he did — that it was this meeting in St. Louis which made him, for the first time, suspicious of Burr's intentions, and point to this letter as proof that he was trying to render Burr and his schemes innocuous. A very subtle, wriggling man indeed!

On September 23rd Burr was speaking cordially to Governor Harrison of a number of things, but not of the contents of this letter. From Vincennes he turned eastward, his preliminary mission accomplished. He passed Blennerhassett's Island in October, to find its master still away, and his impressionable wife also. Then back to Washington late in November, still ignorant of the blaze of rumor that had been dogging his footsteps all the way, only a few days behind, yet never quite catching up. The West was kindling to the fire as it rolled along, credulously, casting the faint remembrance of fainter hints, expressions and gestures of

the unknowing victim as further fuel upon the conflagration, indignant all the more because, in its open-hearted hospitality, it had been taken in by the suave, courtly Easterner.

In the East, Yrujo — at least it seems to have been Yrujo — was busy building a second backfire so as to surround the proposed filibusterer against his beloved country, and destroy him. A series of *Queries* appeared anonymously in the *Gazette of the United States* — Yrujo had long before shown his talent for achieving anonymous publication in American newspapers — asking certain questions which by their very vagueness were calculated to excite the deepest alarm. "How long will it be," demanded the Querist, "before we shall hear of Colonel Burr being at the head of a revolutionary party on the Western waters? Is it a fact that Colonel Burr has formed a plan to engage the adventurous and enterprising young men from the Atlantic States to Louisiana? Is it one of the inducements that an immediate convention will be called from the States bordering on the Ohio and Mississippi to form a separate government?" Is it a fact that he intends to seize New Orleans, and how soon will he, aided by British gold and British ships, reduce Mexico and seize all its store of treasure? Is it a fact, etc., etc.?<sup>24</sup>

Never once a positive affirmation; just a series of hypothetical leading questions such as every skillful lawyer employs in cross-examination to bring matters before the jury without the dull necessity of adducing proof. The method, in fact, was remarkably successful. The newspapers of the country — forerunners of the headline hunters of today — played up the veiled charges with gusto, copied and recopied them until they had spread like a rash from Maine to Texas, meeting midway the onrushing smoke of Stephen Minor's rumors, and uniting to amplify and confirm each other.

Anthony Merry read the *Queries*, hearkened to the seething murmurs which had already invaded the capital, and became panic-stricken. The conspiracy had been discovered; all was lost! For these queries tallied neatly with the scheme which Burr had poured into his willing ears — so neatly, that again one wonders whether Wilkinson from the very beginning had not kept Yrujo apprised of the course of events.

Merry wrote to his Government in considerable agitation. "He [Burr] or some of his agents have either been indiscreet in their communications, or have been betrayed by some person in whom they considered that they had reason to confide." But the British Minister had committed himself too far with his superiors to re-

treat now, so, perforce, he closed on a lamely optimistic note. "It is, however, possible that the business may be so far advanced as, from the nature of it, to render any further secrecy impossible."<sup>25</sup>

### 3. FINANCES

Burr came back to Washington to find the press of the nation barking loudly at his heels, his journey the subject of speculation, his supposedly traitorous designs whispered from mouth to mouth. He hurried at once to Merry, seemingly unperturbed at the clamor, anxious only to find out whether or not the promised response from England had given him what he wanted — money chiefly, and a British naval demonstration in the Gulf secondarily. Jonathan Dayton, his lieutenant and most loyal confidant, who had been ill for a considerable period in the West, had preceded him by several days to report to Merry as to the progress of their plans.

But Merry had no news. The English Government was strangely silent to his feverish requests. Merry put it down to the loss of a packet boat — he was a master in the art of self-delusion. So, for that matter, was Burr. He could not see that his schemes were already doomed; he failed to read aright the growing sentiment of the country, or to realize the fatal power of the press. He had been guilty of a similar blind spot in connection with Cheetham's campaign. Worst of all, he was evidently a poor judge of character. There were too many men whom he accepted at face value, and confided in trustingly to his great hurt. Trust in General James Wilkinson was to prove his most outstanding and most tragic error.

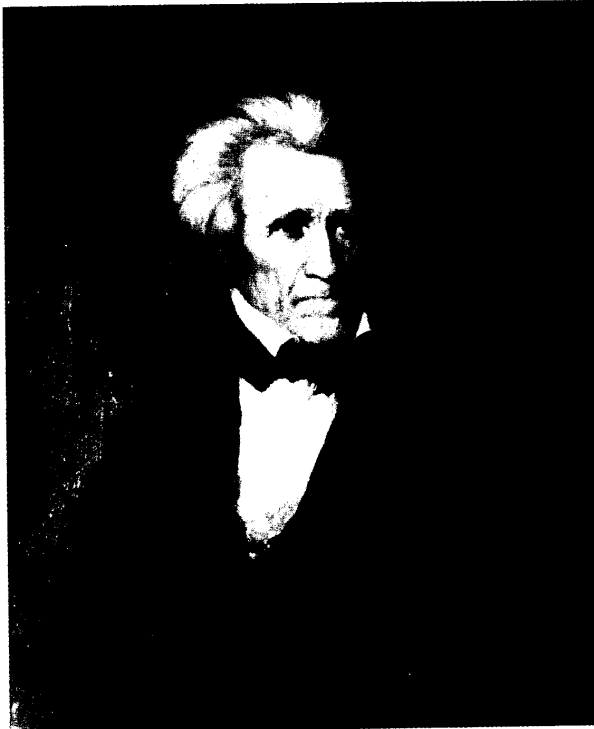
Burr saw the bubble bursting when Merry told him he had not heard from England. His plans called for the commencement of his movement in the early spring of 1806. Without money, however — and his requirements were considerable — he could do nothing. He told Merry as much, and took pains to express his deepest disappointment. He even told him Williamson had written "that his Majesty's government were disposed to afford him their assistance." This statement was made out of whole cloth. Williamson, even if he *had* written to Burr, of which there is no evidence, had been engaged in a losing fight with the authorities in England, and knew it. It was necessary, Burr pursued, for an English fleet to "cruise off the mouth of the Mississippi at the latest by the 10th of April next, and to continue there until the commanding officer should receive information from him or from



Courtesy of Estate of Dr. John E. Saffell

MR. AND MRS. HARMAN BLENNERHASSETT

From *Diary of Burr*



*Courtesy of The New York Historical Society*

ANDREW JACKSON

*From a portrait by Asher B. Durand*

Mr. Daniel Clark of the county having declared itself independent." Again that queer insistence on New Orleans. Actually, of course, the fleet was to act as a convoy for his expedition, which was scheduled to sail from New Orleans to Vera Cruz, and from there march overland to Mexico City. But the idea of New Orleans' independence seemed to have taken root. As for his Western journey — Western secession and the break-up of a nation that had humiliated him was Merry's abiding passion — Burr resorted to purposeful vagueness. It was necessary to keep Merry's interest alive, but Burr had nothing definite to report. In fact he had not even been considering the matter. At no time, even when witnesses came forward by the score, secure in the knowledge that thereby they gained governmental favor, was there the slightest whisper that he had mentioned secession on this journey. The best he could do was to hint that, once Louisiana was independent, and Mexico conquered, the West would find it profitable to secede and join in a vast new Empire. The one thing he did harp on was the matter of funds — £110,000 to be placed to the credit of John Barclay of Philadelphia and Daniel Clark of New Orleans. All of which Merry duly reported to Lord Mulgrave.<sup>26</sup>

Meanwhile Yrujo had been reporting to *his* Government that "the supposed expedition against Mexico is ridiculous and chimerical in the present state of things; but I am not unaware that Burr, in order to get moneys from the English Minister or from England, has made to him some such proposition, in which he is to play the leading role."<sup>27</sup> Evidently Yrujo had exact knowledge of Burr's most secret interviews with Merry, yet dismissed contemptuously without a word the "Western secession conspiracy." A letter dated June 25, 1807, addressed by Governor Folch to the Governor-General of Cuba, illuminates startlingly the curious foreknowledge of Yrujo and other Spanish officials concerning every move that Burr made during all this period. "It is necessary . . ." wrote Folch, "to inform your Excellency that during the disturbances of Burr the aforesaid general [Wilkinson] has, by means of a person in his confidence, constantly maintained a correspondence with me, in which he has laid before me not only the information which he acquired, but also his intentions for the various exigencies in which he might find himself."<sup>28</sup>

Rebuffed in his attempts to extract money from Merry, Burr was compelled to turn elsewhere for the funds he so vitally needed. He remembered Harman Blennerhassett, the Irish gentleman who had planted an English manor in the heart of the Western wilderness. He wrote him a letter regretting that he had missed him on



his last journey. He alluded to Blennerhassett's talents, and spoke of them as deserving a less inactive sphere; he hinted that with his growing family his diminishing revenues might be recouped by certain plans Burr had in mind.<sup>29</sup> Blennerhassett in truth was finding the Island a drain on his resources, and even then was offering it for sale, with no bidders. Gentleman farming might do in England, but the wilderness was a hard taskmaster.

Blennerhassett took the bait at once. He wrote back on December 21, 1805 — though the letter was not to arrive until the middle of February — that “I should be honoured in being associated with you, in any contemplated enterprise you would permit me to participate in. The amount of means I could at first come forward with would be small. You might command my services as a lawyer [this to Burr!] or in any other way you should suggest as being most useful.”<sup>30</sup> Poor, erratic soul! Not Burr himself was to suffer more in the dénouement!

This, for the moment, was a minor string to Burr's bow. The paltry few thousands that Blennerhassett might presently raise would be but a drop in the insatiable ocean of expense. Merry had failed him; France, in the person of Turreau, would certainly not listen to a scheme of Mexican conquest. France and Spain were allies. Then, in his desperation, he conceived a plan that was breathtaking in its audacity. So audacious, in fact, that almost one's sense of its moral obliquity is destroyed in the contemplation.

On December 5, 1805, Jonathan Dayton, the Man Friday, visited Yrujo, the Spanish Minister, in Philadelphia. He was there, he informed the sophisticated Spaniard, to disclose certain horrendous secrets, upon which he placed a modest price of thirty to forty thousand dollars. Yrujo encouraged him to proceed, thinking he knew what it was about; but to his surprise, Dayton unfolded himself in the role of a traitor — a traitor to Burr, his fellow conspirator. With a great show of frankness, Dayton disclosed in detail Burr's dealings with Merry, of the plans he had proposed to the British Minister for taking the Floridas and Mexico, and joining thereto the West; he told of Williamson's mission to England; he even talked of the exact measures to be employed, including the British fleet off New Orleans. In only one small particular did he stretch the matter. He said that the British Cabinet had received the scheme favorably, and that even then Mr. Pitt was considering it seriously.<sup>31</sup>

Was Dayton then actually double-crossing Burr? Not at all. It was Burr's own scheme. He had been in close conference with

Jefferson only five days before and had been informed, much to his astonishment, that there was to be no war with Spain. In fact, he was later to describe the situation to Wilkinson. “About the last of October our cabinet was seriously disposed for war with the Spaniards; but more recent accounts of the increasing and alarming aggressions and annoyance of the British, and some courteous words from the French, have banished every such intention.” This necessitated a change in their plans. Fundamentally, the proposed invasion of Mexico was conditioned on a declaration of war. In such event the West would have rallied to Burr, and the expedition would have been earmarked for success. England, before its “increasing and alarming aggressions,” would have been an ally both of Burr and of the United States. “On the subject of a certain speculation,” he continued, “it is not deemed material to write till the whole can be communicated. The circumstance referred to in a letter from Ohio remains in suspense; the auspices, however, are favorable, and it is believed that Wilkinson will give audience to a delegation composed of Adair and Dayton in February. Can 25 — [boats?] be had in your vicinity to move at some few hours notification?”<sup>32</sup> This obviously is not the language of a conspirator plotting secession. He is disappointed in the prospect of a war — a war which would inflame the West with patriotism, and hurl them upon the Spaniard even as they longed. Again, and again, at the risk of belaboring the point, must this be made clear. The other scheme, referred to in a letter from Ohio which Wilkinson never produced, must have been the alternative plan — if the pending war failed — which Burr was in fact to attempt to put into execution. That is, the peaceful settlement of lands on the Washita in a vast colonization scheme, and the abandonment for the moment of dreams of Mexico.

So that, with the Mexican scheme dropped, no harm could be done by disclosing it, after the event, to Yrujo. Even in failure and collapse, some profit might be extracted from an alarmed Spain. Unfortunately, Burr did not know that Yrujo and the Spanish officials were already aware of everything that Dayton disclosed with such frightened whisperings. More, they knew even that England had failed Burr, that Jefferson had turned from trumpeting of war to meek, pacific smiles, and that the danger to their domains was temporarily past. Whereupon Yrujo dismissed Dayton with vague promises, to insure further revelations, and wrote home about this new and perplexing turn of events. For Wilkinson had not apprised the Spaniards of this new scheme. Burr had worked it alone, and evidently on the spur of the moment.

Failing to extract cash from the elusive Spaniard on this first visit, Dayton returned to the attack with a quick shift in his tactics. This time he admitted that Burr's plans had gone astray in London, but that a brand-new plan had been evolved. It was nothing less than to introduce into the City of Washington armed men, who, at a signal from Burr, would seize Jefferson, the aged George Clinton, and the President of the Senate. With the chiefs of the government in their control, the conspirators would then descend on the banks and the public arsenal, and declare Burr the head of the government. If the East roused itself in behalf of Jefferson, Burr would then burn the navy, except for sufficient shipping to take him and his followers to New Orleans, there to proclaim the independence of Louisiana and the Western States.<sup>33</sup>

There is no question that this astonishing scheme was merely a bogey to extract money from Yrujo. Nothing could have been further from Burr's real plans — had he even toyed with the idea, he certainly would not have disclosed it to Yrujo, who could do nothing to further, and much to block such a plot. Nevertheless, it was a thoroughly discreditable idea to broach, even as the mock plan of Western disunion to Merry, and betrays a growing moral obtuseness on Burr's part, not to speak of Dayton — which had been conspicuously lacking in former years. In the desperation of their need, plots and weird conspiracies were being hatched in infinite variety for the delectation of the foreign diplomats.

Strangely enough, this "almost insane plan," as Yrujo called it, attracted a certain degree of interest and respectful attention from the Minister, just as the conspirators had hoped. Forewarned, he had been wily enough; now that no one had tipped him off in advance, he was as gullible as Merry himself. For, he told Cevallos in his report, "I confess, for my part, that in view of all the circumstances it seems to me easy to execute, although it will irritate the Atlantic States, especially those called central — that is, Virginia, Maryland, Delaware, Pennsylvania, New Jersey and New York." Perhaps Burr and Dayton were cleverer in their methods than the bald documents would seem to indicate.

Yrujo gave Dayton \$1500 outright for his pretended treachery to Burr, and solicited from his home government an additional \$1000 for him as well as a pension of \$1500 a year.<sup>34</sup> This was first blood for the pair. They actually obtained the extra \$1000, but the pension was peremptorily refused. Cevallos, in Madrid, was in a better position to know the exact state of affairs, through Mexico and the spy listed in his secret Code Book as No. 13. On February

3rd he was telling Yrujo that England had troubles of her own at home, and that Dayton's "secret" had not been exactly a secret to him.<sup>35</sup>

#### 4. RECRUITING

By the end of February, Burr was exceedingly dejected. Even the small pension Yrujo had promised could not restore his spirits. The larger sum that Dayton had demanded had been turned aside with polite Spanish evasions; Merry had obviously no standing with his own government; Williamson had evidently written and told him to expect little or nothing from England. The United States was farther away from war than ever before. Wilkinson had betrayed a strange inclination to discuss political campaigns rather than expeditions. The whole game no longer seemed worth the candle. Whereupon Burr took a deep breath and went to see his arch-enemy, Thomas Jefferson. This was on February 22, 1806, exactly two years after that famous toast about the "union of all honest men!"<sup>36</sup>

Jefferson was to record this last strange interview with a good deal of malicious satisfaction. According to Jefferson, Burr reminded him of his former services "in bringing on the present order of things . . . that he could do me much harm; he wished, however, to be on different ground," and hinted that he would be "in town some days, if I should have anything to propose to him." To which Jefferson replied that he was sorry, the public had withdrawn its confidence from Burr, and that as to his threats, he "feared no injury which any man could do me; that I had never done a single act, or been concerned in any transaction, which I feared to have fully laid open."<sup>37</sup> Of their conversation there is no other record.

In any event, Burr had humiliated himself once more. In a moment of bleak despair he had been willing to cast aside the plans of years, and assume the safety and orderliness of a governmental position. Jefferson very cheerfully and firmly closed that door to security. There was nothing left but to go ahead.

He reread Blennerhassett's letter, and sat down to answer it. "Your talents and acquirements seem to have destined you for something more than vegetable life," he wrote flatteringly, "and since the first hour of our acquaintance, I have considered your seclusion as a fraud on society." Burr had, it seemed, just such a project in mind, a speculation, as Blennerhassett himself had described. However, there was little expectation of its commencement until December, and "as the matter, in its present state,

can not be satisfactorily explained by letter, the communication will be deferred until a personal interview can be had."<sup>38</sup>

He threw himself once more with all his old restless energies into the affair. Mexico — or colonization! Either way meant a new and possibly more abundant life. Alston was called upon again for funds; he spoke to Smith and Ogden, of Miranda fame. He started the enlistment of adventurous young men. He sounded out "General" William Eaton, a fantastic character who had the year before seated a pretender on the throne of Tripoli by an epic march with a motley array across burning desert sands. He was now in Washington, trying vainly to obtain Congressional reimbursement of moneys claimed to have been expended for the benefit of the American government, and exceedingly loud in denunciation of an Administration that had not backed up his Tripolitan adventure. He was a familiar sight in the Washington taverns, accoutered with an outlandish hat and Turkish sash, tossing off huge potatoes and hiccuping into his cups anent the base neglect of heroes by a republican government. Certainly the last person in the world to be inducted into the inner circle of a treasonable conspiracy.

Yet Eaton was to testify to that very thing at Richmond. According to him, Burr had spoken to him during the winter of 1805-6 of a military expedition he was organizing against the Spanish provinces, hinting that it was being done with the secret authority of the American government, and based upon the inevitableness of war with Spain. Eaton agreed to join, and the feasibility of penetrating to Mexico was discussed. Thus far, the story is quite plausible and proper. But then, Eaton maintained, Burr gave vent to "certain indistinct expressions and innuendoes," from which he deduced that "colonel Burr had other projects." Burr railed to him against the administration, and encouraged him in his resentment against Congress. Whereupon Eaton, the loose-mouthed, became suddenly subtle with Burr, pretended acquiescence, and thus brought that reserved and secretive individual to a full disclosure of his horrid plans. It was nothing less than a "project of revolutionizing the territory west of the Allegany; establishing an independent empire there; New-Orleans to be the capital, and he himself to be the chief; organizing a military force on the waters of the Mississippi, and carrying conquest to Mexico." In fact, he was offering Eaton a command in his all-conquering forces, second only to Wilkinson.<sup>39</sup>

But these treasonable plans for forcible disunion were not the only ones to be disclosed to this gentleman of deep potatoes and

loud complaints, whom Burr had never seen before. There was more, much more. Burr, it seemed, now spoke even more wildly. He intended "overthrowing the present Government," and "would turn Congress neck and heels out of doors, assassinate the President, seize the treasury and Navy; and declare himself the protector of an energetic government." This, be it remembered, in the face of Eaton's constant objections and expressions of horror.<sup>40</sup>

Eaton, shocked at these revelations, did not know what to do.

"I durst not place my lonely testimony in the balance against the weight of colonel Burr's character," he was to testify disingenuously. Of course, not a person in all Washington, with the exception of this lonely hero of Tripoli, but knew that Burr's character, in the eyes of officialdom, represented the very nadir of respectability. "I resolved therefore with myself," continued the self-made General naively, "to obtain the removal of Mr. Burr from this country, in a way honorable to him; and on this I did consult him, without his knowing my motive." Whereupon, in February or March, 1806, Eaton hid himself to Jefferson and suggested an ambassadorship for Burr, at Paris, London or Madrid, on the high ground that "colonel Burr ought to be removed from the country, because I considered him dangerous in it." But, strangely enough, he "perceived the subject was disagreeable to the president," and thereupon dropped it, keeping a discreet silence as to the details of the horrendous conspiracy he had just discovered. It is true he hinted vaguely about a possible Western insurrection in the distant future, but the interview was closed rather peremptorily by Jefferson. Whereupon Eaton, after a full disclosure to two unnamed representatives and a senator, who "did not seem much alarmed," returned to Massachusetts and thought no more of Burr and his revolutions until long after, when the whole nation was in a state of alarm, and Jefferson was ordering the country scoured for witnesses against the traitor Burr.<sup>41</sup>

The whole story is a tissue of inherent improbabilities. Burr had opened himself to this stranger as he had to no one else; then, after placing his very life in Eaton's hands, he had consented that the drinking warrior go to Jefferson and obtain for him an embassy. Eaton kept silence with the President, said nothing all the time that rumors were flying thick and fast, and only came forward when the whole weight of the government was being employed to crush Burr.<sup>42</sup>

On January 21, 1807, Senator Plumer found himself opposite

Eaton at a dinner table. That worthy expatiated at length on his exposure of Burr's treason. Only within the week, he said, had he disclosed the truth to Jefferson, and never before to any one else. After listening to the tirade, the caustic Senator felt impelled to confide to his Diary, "The more distant the time, the more distant from Burr, & the louder public opinion is expressed agt Burr — the fuller & stronger are the declarations of Eaton against the accused."<sup>43</sup>

Most remarkable of all, however, is the fact that almost immediately after Eaton placed his deposition in Jefferson's hands, Congress suddenly authorized the payment to him of \$10,000 on a doubtful claim which had been before it for years, and which it had shown no previous disposition to honor. In March, 1807, the payment was promptly made by a government known for its dilatoriness in such matters. No court or jury could possibly accept Eaton's testimony at its face value.

At about the same time Burr spoke also to Commodore Thomas Truxton, an intimate friend of long standing, who had sheltered Burr in his flight after the duel. Truxton had commanded the American fleet in the brief struggle with Tripoli, had acquitted himself with the utmost gallantry, yet found himself now cooling his heels in Washington, under the manifest displeasure of the Administration. To Truxton, however, equally discontented with his condition, a friend, a man who knew how to keep silence, Burr disclosed no such treasonable design as that which Eaton claimed had been opened to him. Truxton was to testify that during the winter of 1805-6, Burr had frequently mentioned to him the subject of speculations in western lands, the proposed canal around Ohio Falls, the possibility of a bridge over that river, and had advised him to forget about the Navy, where, from Jefferson's known policy of attrition, nothing could be expected in the way of a career. Instead, said Truxton, "he wished to see or make me . . . an admiral; that he contemplated an expedition to Mexico, in the event of a war with Spain, which he thought inevitable." In fact, he asked Truxton to assume command of the naval end of the expedition. Truxton inquired if Jefferson were a party to the scheme, and on Burr's emphatic disavowal, declined to participate. The scheme, according to Truxton's testimony, involved the establishment of an independent government in Mexico, and he was told that Wilkinson "had projected the expedition." Many officers of the United States Army and Navy, Burr assured him, would join, as would thousands of Westerners.<sup>44</sup> Nothing about secession, nothing of assassination and seizure of government.

Burr turned also to Charles Biddle, another old friend, in the summer of 1806. To him he spoke of "a settlement on the Mississippi of military men; that the Spaniards he knew were ripe for a revolt, and it would make the fortunes of all those concerned in revolutionizing that country." When Biddle objected that it would lead to war with Spain, Burr replied that war must come in any event.<sup>45</sup>

By that time Burr had come definitely to the conclusion that his original plan for an immediate descent upon Mexico was premature. He had now switched to the colonization scheme. He had his eye on a huge tract of land that would suit his schemes admirably.

In 1797 the Spanish Government entered into a contract with Baron Bastrop whereby the latter bound himself to settle five hundred families on a tract of land, thirty miles square, abutting the Washita River in the Territory of Louisiana. In return, Spain agreed to convey title to the promoter, and obligated itself further to furnish the settlers with sufficient food for a period of six months. Governor Carondelet found himself unable to live up to this part of the agreement — the supplying of food — and in exchange, released Bastrop from the requirements of the contract relating to settlement. Bastrop claimed that his title to the land was not thereby impaired, and sold his rights to various persons who in turn conveyed to one Charles Lynch. Burr had already commenced negotiations with Lynch for the purchase of 350,000 acres of this grant. His intentions were obvious, and sufficiently specified in his conversations with Biddle. He would settle a large community of young, militarily disposed adventurers on the tract, which was now in the newly carved Territory of Orleans, and close to the Spanish border. There he would establish himself as a landed gentleman, surrounded by friends and congenial associates, and bide his time. Sooner or later, he felt certain, the United States must clash with Spain — sooner, if Wilkinson would do his part. At the first sign of hostilities, his settlers would march on the Spanish possessions and, in conjunction with Wilkinson and those of the American army and navy whom he could induce to join, sweep all before them. The country would rise and hail him as a deliverer, and the original dream of Mexico and a government of his own would be fulfilled.

## 5. PLOT AND COUNTERPLOT

On April 16, 1806, Burr wrote to Wilkinson: "The execution of our project is postponed till December; want of water in Ohio, rendered movement impracticable; other reasons rendered delay expedient. The association is enlarged, and comprises all that Wilkinson could wish. Confidence limited to a few. . . . Burr wrote you a long letter last December, replying to a short one deemed very silly. Nothing has been heard from Brigadier since October. Is Cusion et Portes right? Address Burr at Washington."<sup>46</sup>

The *Brigadier*, it seems, was a code word for Wilkinson, *Cusion* and *Portes* for the frontier officers whom Wilkinson was trying to interest in the Mexican venture, and *want of water in Ohio* meant funds were lacking, and that Merry had failed them. The letters mentioned were evidently Wilkinson's belated forwarding of Daniel Clark's warning, and Burr's reply thereto, though there is a discrepancy in the dates. Wilkinson, prepared to drop Burr completely and turn the whole affair to his own advantage, had since then been very careful about incriminating himself in writing. Burr was to receive no further communications from him.

While waiting impatiently to hear from Wilkinson, Burr turned again to Yrujo, who now seemed his last resort for adequate funds. This time he went to him direct, and dropped the pretense of Dayton's betrayal. He spoke of Western secession, of New Orleans, of subversion of the government—all the old treacheries which were peculiarly grateful to Spain, not to speak of England and France. He now asked point-blank for the sinews with which to carry out these schemes. Yrujo was impressed with the possibilities of success, and so advised his home government.<sup>47</sup> But he refused to disburse any further moneys to Burr until he had received instructions from Spain.

Whereupon Burr tried to alarm him. He suddenly stopped his visits, and Dayton once more appeared on the scene, explaining to the credulous Envoy that Burr, disgusted with his dilatoriness, had turned to England again, and had revived his original idea of a cooperative attack on the Spanish possessions. Dayton expressed himself as eager to protect Spain from Burr's scheme of conquest. In fact, he advocated the immediate reinforcement of the garrisons at Pensacola and Mobile, and, incidentally, felt that he should receive further honorariums for his good services.<sup>48</sup>

Unfortunately, Yrujo, though alarmed, was stubborn in his refusal to pay out any more sums from his private purse.

In which the event justified him. For Don Pedro Cevallos, who at first had been interested in the despatches from the United States, was soon to warn him against any further outlays of money to the adventurers, and finally, as both the American and the European scene cleared up favorably for Spain, declared flatly that the King would not in any way encourage Burr's designs.<sup>49</sup>

Pitt had died in England, and Merry's letter of November 25, 1805, had fallen into the hands of Charles James Fox, England's new Prime Minister, foe to Pitt's American policy, and well disposed to the United States. About June 1, 1806, Merry was astounded to receive a polite notification that His Majesty had graciously consented to accept his request for recall, and that his successor would soon be on his way to take over the British Ministry. Merry, never very bright, wrote vainly that he had never even entertained such an idea, much less suggested it, but Fox paid no heed to his plaintive protestations.

Almost immediately after the receipt of this dismissal, Burr called again on Merry. He would, he said, "though very reluctantly," have to address himself now to the French and Spanish Governments, inasmuch as Great Britain had proved herself shamefully lacking in consideration. He was playing Yrujo against Merry, and *vice versa*, with an agility worthy of a better cause. And both sources of a magical stream of funds failed him. As he told Merry, "with or without such support [his venture] certainly would be made shortly."<sup>50</sup>