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THE LITERARY WORKS OF THOMAS PAINE.

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The chief literary works of Thomas Paine are his pamphlets entitled "Common Sense"; "The Crisis"; "The Rights of Man"; and "The Age of Reason." They are thus placed in the order of their composition. After more than a century since he has passed away from earth, his name is now more generally associated with his last work. It is probable that if he had not given that to the world, the popular estimate of him should have been different from what it is. One finds an interest in noting the gradual change in his religious sentiments which found in that remarkable work the full flower of his character. The man who in the early days of his literary life evinced a certain reverence for things divine as contained in the book of revealed religion, turned to the destruction of that upon which he had builded so admirably, thus denying the authenticity of that upon which he had called to establish his dogmas. His final appeal to the jury of public opinion was a denunciation of the testimony of the witness upon whom he had relied to win his case.

From this apparent fact we have an insight into the character of the man himself, as there is revealed to us that as the chameleon takes on the hue of the substance upon which it rests, this brilliant but unstable man reflected the opinions of the associates whom he admired and in whose opinions he reposed confidence. The pamphlet "Common Sense" was the first noticeable work of a man who had been in this country but little more than a year. It gave evidence of an accurate grasp of the situation as it prevailed in the American colonies. In those times it was not easy to speedily ascertain the sentiments of a people stretching as they did along the Atlantic seaboard. Interchange of thought as afforded today by multiplied newspapers was practically impossible save by diligent personal touch, and the mails were slow and uncertain. It

was a marvelous thing that the man should have obtained such information so speedily, and information that was so accurate. The main idea of "Common Sense" was not new; for the question of separation from the English crown had been frequently discussed. The immortal oration of Patrick Henry had fired the heart of the impulsive Virginians, and the more phlegmatic New Englanders had been impressed by the clear-cut logic of Samuel Adams. From the day in 1774 that Benjamin Franklin presented before the privy council in Boston the petition for the removal of obnoxious officials of the crown, so vividly described by Bancroft, the aged philosopher was devoting his marvelous influence to the cause of separation. It was to him more than to any other of the patriots that should be attributed the document of formal separation, the date of whose signing has ever been celebrated as the American Passover. So that when it is asserted that "Common Sense" was "the first argument for separation," and that "Paine did more to cause the Declaration of Independence than any other man," we are asked to pluck the laurels from the brows of a score of patriots as well as to impeach the historical accuracy of Bancroft and the annalists of the Revolutionary era.

To understand Paine is much of a problem. Here is a man of nearly forty years suddenly appearing, a stranger, amid the exciting scenes of the early years of the Revolution, wielding a pen unlike the scholarly and therefore tedious scholars of the age. It was this style that gave him audience. He set the pace of the modern paragraphist. He went to the bottom of a proposition like a surgeon lancing an abscess. While other men took sesquipedalian words and involved sentences he boldly blurted out in ten words all and more than they had said. Here is a fair representation of the style affected in those days:

"There is a class of men in the world who, when they once engage in a pursuit, or an act of any importance, will persist in working it out, rather than be supposed by relinquishing it, when they discover themselves wrong, to cast an implication on their own judgments."

When Paine wanted to say anything he said it about in this way :

“The children of Israel in their request for a king urged this plea : that he may judge us and go out before us and fight our battles but in countries where he is neither judge nor general, as in England, a man would be puzzled to know what is his business.”

The reader did not need a collegiate education to understand things put in that way. For this incisive modern method of expression Paine is entitled to the highest credit. It is the style that makes even today, long after the need of its fervent exhortation, the series of letters known as “The Crisis” such refreshing reading. In considering “The Crisis”, you shall find the same recognition of an Over-ruling Providence and quotations from the Sacred Writings wherewith to prove his points. The Tories, he fears, have been given over “to a spirit of infidelity.” The origin of kingship, as given in the book of Samuel is used for all that it is worth, which is saying much. “The Crisis” was intended to strengthen the hearts of the patriots after that “Common Sense” had urged upon them the desirability of immediate separation. “These are times”, he said “that try men’s souls.” To meet the trying issues without panic is the object of his pamphlets. The first two numbers very adroitly outline the hopeful condition of the American cause. The second and fifth, addressed to Lord Howe, were not intended for his perusal but to put in the mouths of the patriot soldiers the challenge of derision. He showed the invincibility of the methods of campaign and it is no wonder that they plucked up courage and took heart again.

Whence did he derive his inspiration? That he had a method of writing as man talks familiarly with his neighbor, face to face, and so compelling attention is undeniable. His free-lance style awakened men’s attention and was brought in contrast with the dreary platitudes of the essayists under which they were accustomed to go peacefully to sleep. That was born in him and constituted his capital. All the more remarkable is it from the fact that he had been reared under the strict forms of the Society of Friends who were accustomed

to regard all mercurial dispositions and fondness for levity or satire as a temptation of the devil. But he had grown into a chronic state of rebellion against established things. He was restless under any form of restraint. He wanted to go to sea to be at liberty to do as he pleased. He entered public service and for some reason failed to maintain himself, and his first published utterance was a protest against the low salaries of men under the employ of government. He failed in a little business of his own, and would not live with his wife. Here you have a restless, impatient, nervous spirit, with mental faculties alert and quick in perception, affording all the characteristics of a stormy petrel craving excitement and unhappy in repose. He is open to any influence proceeding from characters which he admired. His education was not fundamental but it was absorbent. Given a leader whom he revered and to whom he was drawn by the novelty or popularity of opinion, and he would follow as a loyal disciple who could put into striking phrase the more labored conceptions of his master. He was thus drawn to Benjamin Franklin, at whose instance he embarked for America. He absorbed from him the views which took shape in "Common Sense." The style of Paine and Franklin were not dissimilar. Both were apothegmatical. Franklin's proverbial philosophy seems to be the basis upon which Paine formulated his political philosophy. When "Common Sense" appeared there were many to say "Dr. Franklin wrote this." Paine says himself that the opinion of its authorship was divided between Franklin and Adams. But it is easily ascertainable that a year before its publication Franklin gave Paine the materials out of which the book was constructed. The broad forecast of Franklin, the facts so difficult in those days to completely elicit, the possible dangers and difficulties to be avoided or surmounted, show the mind of the philosopher behind it all. Indeed, it was a forestalling of what Franklin himself was contemplating, but was slow in executing because of the many things which were absorbing his immediate attention. So when the remarkable letters entitled "The Crisis" were constructed Paine was living in the intimate companionship of Washington at whose camp he was

welcomed on account of his engaging conversational powers. He must have been an excellent listener or he should not have had the reputation of a distinguished conversationalist; the two go together. He had also the opportunity of absorbing the opinions of Barlow and Biddle and was in touch with the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the Congressional Assembly. He knew what was going on and how men talked who were shaping the destinies of the infant people. The forceful arguments and suggestions that appeared in those letters had been the topic of conversation with the master minds of the Revolution. The detailed scheme of the permanent Congress was, according to the historian Ellis, the work of Franklin. As "Common Sense" was not an original argument for separation, but as appears upon its face an argument for its immediate execution, so "The Crisis" was the embodiment of the military situation and possibilities put into such a shape that men would be greedy to read and quick to perceive.

Now we are confronted with the strange condition that a man who was able to render such real service, exhibiting such mental alertness, and possessed of a terse, nervous, effective style of composition, and who, his posthumous admirers claim, was the leading spirit and brains of the Revolutionary era the acknowledged impersonation of the cause of human liberty, should never have been called to official or responsible station. He was to be sure, the clerk of the committee on Foreign Affairs, but that seems to be a reward for services and a means of support. He had not developed that disrespect for the sentiment of men regarding Sacred Inspiration and so his influence was not benumbed on that account. Although popularly discussing finance and statecraft he was not called upon to direct in either department. We shall never know, in all probability, why this was so, but by judging from our acquaintance with similar conditions it is not impossible to infer that he did not impress the leaders of the cause as a man upon whom reliance could be safely placed. The fathers of the republic were keen to utilize the masterful attributes of any man; but they were wary and patriotic. Instead of finding Paine called to administer affairs, we find the stormy pe-

triel unfolding his wings and scouring across seas in search of other fields of activity, exhibiting an unaccountable bitterness especially towards Washington. He declared him to be "treacherous in private friendship and a hypocrite in public life—an apostate or an imposter." He reflected upon the military career of Washington. He said that in his apothetical character there was nothing that could kindle a flame of enthusiasm, neither friendship, fame or country. He afterward held Washington responsible for his incarceration in a French prison. It ought to be easy to read between lines here. Disappointed in America he returned to England with his literary success prompting him to essay new adventures. It ought not to be questioned that he was sincere in his republican views. He was a man of one great predominating idea. But he was always getting into trouble about it.

In England he formed a friendship with the brilliant Burke. But it was not long before he became embroiled with him and the remarkable document called "The Rights of Man" appeared. This essay is the least incendiary of his writings; indeed the style is rather calm for Paine. The arguments are impressive and partake of dignity. The action of the British cabinet in repressing it and holding the author to account was not so much on account of its radical character as that the dreadful things growing to a climax in France made the lovers of orderly government nervous. It is said that Pitt admitted the force of the argument but feared that it might lead to disruption in England somewhat similar to that which was drenching its neighbor of France with blood. The struggle upward of men into a larger liberty which distinguished the 18th century required careful men as well as brainy men. Burke was what we might term a practical politician in the better sense. He apprehended that the service of government rested upon broad conceptions of political philosophy and appreciation of the unreadiness of men in his day to come into the largest possibilities of self-government. Men themselves were not ready for the ideal. All that the French had done was to prove that the people could very easily tear down. Thus his "Reflections upon the French Revolution" had for an object

the consevation of human welfare under monarchical restrictions; that it was impossible to entirely destroy the old order which had demonstrated such strength throughout Europe without destroying the fundamental ideas of accepted social order. The French Revolution established the correctness of Burke's view, for it did not reach its awful climax until after the publication of his tract. To destroy existing order is not the same as constructing an opposite social life. To men who know the results of political rashness and how carelessness regarding means for bringing about a desirable end terminates in an invitation to indescribable confusion and violence, the argument of Burke must stand approved, as the circumstances of his times required. In the enjoyment of our free institutions we cannot agree with Burke and so must applaud the vigorous paragraphs of Paine, so far as the inherent wrong of hereditary government is concerned. To us it appears undeniable that the inborn rights of men include immunity from oppressive taxation for the support of a splendid and exclusive class of rulers, the careful education of the young and the benevolent care of the virtuous aged, and the spread of a universal peace and fellowship among the peoples of the earth. The question is whether the world in 1780 was ready for ideal government. One had only to look over the English channel to find the answer.

It has been said that "The Rights of Man" swept Burke from his high position and wide influence as a statesman and ruined his political aspirations. But Windham in his diary speaks of Burke as already "decried, persecuted and proscribed" before his "Reflections" were printed. He was then by many "considered as little better than an ingenious madman". He had become unpopular in the House of Commons, even upon his own side, as resultant from the several questions of the India administration, the impeachment of Hastings and his position upon the Regency. "The speculations of all doubters first originate in some crisis of personal or mental history". Finding it to be more convenient to be out of England than in it, Paine exiles himself to France, and plunges into the midst of the political caldron. His instability and vanity ap-

pear in his willingness to accept a seat in a legislative body whose language he could neither speak nor understand. His addresses in the National Assembly were written in English and translated into French by Brissot, his friend, who was the apostle of the Girondists. Brissot was the disciple of Voltaire to whom he had dedicated his chief work. His influence upon Paine was dominant. It was this influence combined with the philosophy of Rousseau that resulted in a strange admixture in Paine's character. In his French life he exhibited an indomitable radicalism and bitterness of expression mingled with a tenderness of sentiment for the hapless victims of his own logic. He who had denounced kings as implacable enemies of mankind when brought to face an unfortunate monarch desired that he might be set free and so brought himself under suspicion.

The movement which culminated in the French Revolution was at once political, social and religious. The principle was correct for it sought to redress the ills of humanity, to destroy the outworn feudalism of the times and to accommodate society to modern needs. It appealed to a people who were persuaded that the privileges of the upper class and the existence of an established religion were the chief causes of social distress. The officials of church were in league with those of state. Avarice, simony, vulgar exclusivism were as chargeable to priests as to courtiers. The apparent hollowness of Christian profession disqualified the literary men of the Renaissance from accepting the evidences of Christianity. In this declension of religious life in England arose the school of the deists. In France the clergy had resisted the Reformation and promoted the civil wars; they had obtained a revocation of the Edict of Nantes, which had protected Protestantism, even though a million of industrious artizans were lost to France and the enforcement of the measure was affected by dragonnades in which a brutal soldiery was let loose upon an innocent people. In England the Scriptures were construed into a defense of the hereditary rights of kings. The 18th century opened with a struggle for emancipation of intellect as set forth in the philosophy of Locke and for civil and reli-

gious liberty. The new philosophers found that their most potent antagonists were those who held to regal and clerical prerogative. When Paine became a prominent figure in the red days of Paris the seed had fruited. He absorbed again the opinions of men he admired loyally following their opinions. He became the willing disciple of Voltaire, exceeding him in his power of satire and outvying his master in mockery. He could say things more impressively than his masters. He who had purloined the philosophy of Franklin for his "Common Sense" and who had used his acquaintance with the plans and purposes of Washington for his "Crisis", became the latter-day pamphleteer of Bolingbroke, Voltaire, Morgan, Chubb and Volney. Is that too much to say? The sole appeal of the reconstructionists was to Reason. That was the slogan. The literary men were all infidels appealing to human reason. When the supreme triumph came, churches were stripped, the sanctity of St. Denis, the mausoleum of the dead kings, was violated, the images of Christ and the saints were trampled under foot, and a lewd woman was installed upon the high altar of Notre Dame as the impersonation of Reason.

Under these influences "The Age of Reason" was composed, in hiding for fear of proscription, where there was no access to Bible or Testament, neither of which could he procure anywhere. In his opinion he had composed a work that no believer writing at his ease in a library of church books could refute. The ready memory, the electrical absorption of the opinions of others and his wonderful facility for recasting them in popular expression remained to him. The result of his industry was the compression into a stirring pamphlet the sum of the conversations of the literary coteries, which had been drawn from the published thoughts of the writers of the half-century. His book was like the address of a mob-orator on the subject of national finance. The language is plebeian wrought out in coarse Saxon. The satire of Voltaire turns into ribaldry tinted with acrimony. He shows that he had acquired his philosophy from the English deists, his bitterness from Voltaire and his politics from that strange character, Rousseau, who, although composing a melody that, coupled with Isaac Watts'

simple hymn, has been used for a century by pious mothers in lulling their babes to slumber, sent his own children as they were born to a foundling asylum.

Is this difficult to establish? Possibly there are a few who are now familiar with the quiet author of "The Moral Philosopher". From Thomas Morgan, Paine derived his argument against the origin and authenticity of the Pentateuch. In the city of Detroit in 1894 there were arrayed a brilliant company of men, some of whom were persuaded of the historical inaccuracy of the Pentateuch and were diligent in their propaganda for the unsettling of men's minds in the divine authorship of the Bible. Against the critics a scholarly teacher arose to state in definite terms the position which they held, appealing to them to say if he had misstated their contention. When assent was given to the accuracy of his statement of their position, he produced the work of Thomas Morgan and read word for word their syllabus, and then drawing forth "The Age of Reason", showed that Paine had sent forth to the world the same statement as if it had emanated from his own mind.

Paine's argument concerning Christianity as a reflection upon the moral government of God, the unreliability of the evidence of miracles and prophecy and the worthlessness of individual inspiration, is all contained in a work by Thomas Chubb entitled "A Discourse Concerning Reason." From this source, also, he derived his argument against the immorality of the New Testament doctrine of redemption through vicarious sacrifice. Both Morgan and Chubb, in their turn, indicate a familiarity with a compilation of essays attributed principally to Charles Blount, published under the general head of "The Oracles of Reason." From these combined sources Paine obtained his views of deistical religion wherein God is declared to be worshiped neither by sacrifice nor mediation, but by being generally amiable and good natured—qualities in which Paine in his closing days was not very conspicuous.

Were it to be demanded that it must be shown that Paine was sufficiently acquainted with the compositions of the early deistical writers, there is this to be said. The principal ar-

guments of Morgan and Chubb are condensed in the posthumous work of Lord Bolingbroke which in those days was ready at hand with the literary men. In addition, the stock argument against the obligation resting upon one man to accept the revelation made to another is well wrought out, almost in its entirety, from Mathew Tyndale's "Christianity as Old as Creation." It was this book which elicited the work, still prized as a classic in our schools, known as Butler's Analogy. With that volume and the reply which Warburton made to Morgan's essays, entitled "The Divine Legation of Moses", men were abundantly familiar. The arguments were at hand and abundantly replied to, although there might have been a want of familiarity with the authors. One may trace the entire development of deistical thought of the 17th and 18th centuries through these works which are to be found in any library of pretension. Indeed, the claim may be fully justified that there is not an argument in "The Age of Reason" that had not been exploited in volumes that had been long published. It is not urged that Paine was a plagiarist, claiming the language of others as his own, but that he was an absorptionist. Paine put the old arguments in different form, interpreting them in the peculiar tongue of which he was master, but in dealing with sacred things he condescended to the language of the pothouse, the vernacular of the *sans culottes*, the ringing phrase of the jargon of La Montaigne. Men who could not wade through the dignified pages of Blount and Morgan and Chubb and who were unable to appreciate the polished sentences of Bolingbroke, caught the "Moll Tearsheet" mode of expression and were hilarious at what they imagined to be a wonderful discovery. It was only a mad scapegrace masquerading in the robes of a wise philosopher or meditative hermit, but betrayed by his own speech. It was an atom entering the lists with Omnipotence—a moment brawling at eternity!

In my advanced years I sat down to read for the first time "The Age of Reason." As I progressed I found my mind recurring to the works of wise and saintly men from whom I had derived the inspiration of my life. As difficulties of in-

terpretation presented themselves I found that I had the answers ready. The labored attack upon the authorship of the Pentateuch by Moses fell to the ground in the absence of any inspired claim that he was. The force of ridicule was broken by the fact that the author had numbered Milton among the inspired writers. The trenchant criticisms upon isolated passages, as book by book the sacred writings were reviewed, I had encountered and answered an hundred times. And when I laid down the book I found myself enquiring: "Is this all that can be urged against that which has been the foundation of all the morality and piety that have inspired the world to human effort and self-sacrifice and brought so much nearer the ideal civilization of the perfect life? Is this the best that can be done towards extinguishing the torch of faith, of robbing the soul of the inspiration of a deathless hope, of silencing the tender wooings of the Voice that spake as never man spake, of transmuting into glaring brass the sweet heavens out of which men had been taught to lift up patient hands in prayer?" If this is all that can be urged against the Book that is the comfort of millions and the silent influence which has brought in the age of which Paine dreamed, I could be only profoundly grateful because of its own declaration: "The Word of the Lord abideth forever."