

CHAPTER FIVE

UNALTERABLY DETERMINED

[His] obstinacy. . . will cause him to foment a thousand unfortunate incidents . . .

~The Comte de Vergennes

Thanks to God that he gave me stubbornness when I know I am right.

~John Adams

I

TWO DAYS OUT FROM BOSTON, in a stiff northeast wind, the *Sensible*, with 350 people on board, sprang a leak. A pump was put immediately in service, yet the leak grew worse day by day.

There was no sign of British cruisers, which to Adams were the worst of evils; but then the second week, off the Grand Banks, the wind began blowing from the northwest, the sea to run high. For one endless, miserable day, in howling winds, the old frigate labored under foresail only. A "very violent gale," recorded Adams, who, in order to write, had to get down on his cabin floor on hands and knees.

By the time the storm passed, the ship was leaking so badly that two pumps had to be manned day and night, unrelenting work in which all hands took part, passengers as well, including John Quincy. The situation was alarming. In the event of another storm or an encounter with the enemy, the captain explained, they would have no chance. The only choice was to make for the nearest friendly port, for Spain, "with all the sail the ship could prudently bear."

The *Sensible* labored slowly across the ocean, until finally, on the morning of December 8, 1779, running with the wind, she reached El Ferrol, on Spain's rocky northwestern tip. It had been a closer

call than anyone liked to think. In less than an hour at anchor at El Ferrol, with the pumps stopped, there were seven feet of water in the hold.

"We have had an escape again," Adams began in a letter to Abigail from shore. "One more storm would very probably [have] carried us to the bottom of the sea," added John Quincy in his report to his mother.

Faced with the prospect of being marooned for weeks while repairs were made, Adams inquired about proceeding overland. The distance to Paris was 1,000 miles. The journey, east across Spain and over the Pyrenees to the French border, was one of extreme difficulty, he was warned, and never more so than in winter. But to sit still and wait again as he had in France, to let circumstance rule, or the whims or priorities of others, were not in his nature. He was determined to go, and talk of difficulties had little effect. Indeed, for a man so constituted as Adams, such talk could well have been the deciding factor. "The season, the roads, the accommodations for traveling are so unfavorable that it is not expected I can get to Paris in less than thirty days," he wrote in explanation to the president of Congress, Samuel Huntington. "But if I were to wait for the frigate, it would probably be much longer. I am determined, therefore, to make the best of way by land."

At first light, December 15, Adams, his sons, Francis Dana, John Thaxter, servants, Spanish guides and muleteers, and two additional Americans who had been aboard the *Sensible*, set off mounted on scrawny mules and looking, as John Thaxter noted, very like a scene from *Don Quixote*, and quixotic the whole undertaking turned out to be. Adams was exhausted before the journey began. In the week since landing he had hardly slept a night, so horrific was the torment of fleas and bedbugs, Spain's "enemies of all repose," as he said.

At the old city of La Coruña provisions were gathered. Three ancient calashes—clumsy, brightly painted two-wheeled carriages—were also added to the caravan, these remarkable for their cracked leather seats and broken harness patched together with rope and twine and pulled by mules with tiny, tinkling bells tied about their necks. As the calashes proved more uncomfortable than the mules, Adams, Dana, and Thaxter chose to go by mule most of the way.

We carried bread and cheese, meat, knives and forks, spoons, apples and nuts [Adams would write]. Indeed, we were obliged to carry . . . our own beds, blankets . . . everything that we wanted. . . . We got nothing at the taverns but fire, water . . . and sometimes the wine of the country.

From La Coruña, their route passed through Betanzos, once the capital of the kingdom of Galicia, then Lugo, Astorga, Burgos, and Bilbao. "There is the grandest profusion of wild irregular mountains I ever saw," Adams wrote. But the roads proved worse even than he had imagined, so rocky and treacherous it was necessary to go by foot a great part of the journey.

"We had nothing worth remarking today except we kept ascending," wrote John Quincy on December 31. Another day's journey was "almost perpendicular." With encouragement from his father, the boy had started a diary, the beginning of what was to be a lifelong enterprise lasting sixty-eight years.

To the Americans the wretchedness of the Spanish people, the squalor of the wayside taverns, were appalling. "Smoke filled every part of the kitchen, stable, and other part[s] of the house, as thick as possible so that it was . . . very difficult to see and breathe," Adams recorded at one tavern. "The mules, hogs, fowls and human inhabitants live . . . all together," he wrote of another overnight accommodation. Everywhere he saw poverty and misery, people in rags. "Nothing appeared rich but the churches, nobody fat but the clergy," he noted sadly.

There were days of rain, fog, and snow, mountains that went endlessly on and on, mountains like "a tumbling sea." The boys were sick with colds. Francis Dana became so ill there was a question whether he could continue. "We go along barking and sneezing and coughing as if we were fitter for a hospital than for travelers on the road," wrote Adams, whose own strength and spirits began to give out. He had never known a worse undertaking, he fumed in his diary. Given the choice of his first crossing on the *Boston*, or this, he would prefer the former with all its horrors. But only to Abigail, in a letter written at Bilbao, did he concede that he had made a mistake coming overland.

The one compensation of the journey was the warmth of the welcome they received along the route. Spain by now had entered the war, but as

an ally of France only. John Jay of New York, the American minister to Spain, had been in Madrid for a year, and his mission had proven hopeless, as the Spanish Court had no interest in recognizing the independence of the United States. Still, no representative of any government would have been treated with more courtesy and friendship than were Adams and his party in town after town, as he was to report proudly.

At last in January, two weeks into the new year 1780, the travelers crossed the frontier at St.-Jean-de-Luz and by nightfall arrived at Bayonne. Leaving Spain, Adams regretted only that he had had no time for a detour to see the famous pilgrimage cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, and that he had to part with his mule, "as he was an excellent animal and had served me well."

Heading on by post chaise, he and his party were in Bordeaux in another few days, and despite fog and icy roads reached Paris on February 9, travel-worn but in "tolerable" health, nearly two months after departing from El Ferrol, three months after setting sail from Boston. A letter from Abigail filled with worry was waiting for him at the Hôtel de Valois on the Rue de Richelieu, which he planned to make his address this time.

LOSING NO TIME, Adams enrolled the boys the next morning in the boarding school at Passy, then called on Franklin. At Versailles the day after, accompanied by Franklin and Francis Dana, Adams "had the honor to wait on" the aged Prime Minister of France, Jean-Frédéric Phélypeaux de Maurepas, who was as old nearly as the century, older even than Franklin; as well as the Minister of Marine, Gabriel Sartine; and the all-important Foreign Minister, the Comte de Vergennes.

In Franklin's estimate, the "disposition" of the Court to the Americans can cause was as favorable as it had ever been, and Adams came away from these initial discussions feeling even more sanguine. He had never heard the French Foreign Ministry "so frank, explicit, and decided," he stressed in a letter to Congress. Most encouraging was the talk of French naval support, and from all that he heard, he grew increasingly optimistic. The largest French fleet yet was preparing to sail. Four thousand troops under General Rochambeau were soon to depart.

"The French Court seemed to be now every day more and more con-