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THE CAREER OF
BENJAMIN FRANKLIN.



SAMUEL ABBOTT GREEN, M.D.,
BOSTON.

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IN THAT CITY.

BY

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AT this anniversary meeting of the American Philosophical Society the name of the founder readily suggests itself; and for that reason I have taken as the subject of my paper the career of Benjamin Franklin, who was during his lifetime, with possibly a single exception, the most conspicuous character in American history.

Whether considered as a printer, a patriot, or a philosopher, Franklin challenges our highest regard and our deepest admiration. Taking him for all in all, in his moral and intellectual proportions, he is the most symmetrically developed man that this country has produced. In popular phrase he was a great all-round man, able to meet any emergency and ever ready to cope with any situation. In many ways he has left behind him the imprint of his mind and of his work on the activities of the present day, to an extent that is unparalleled. To a large degree he had a knack of doing the right thing at the right time, which is epitomized by the American people as horse sense,—a quality which justly assigns him to a high place among men of worldly wisdom. He had a faculty of performing the most arduous labors on the most momentous occasions in such a quiet way that even his nearest friends often were entirely ignorant of his agency in the matter; and little did he care whether the credit of the deed came to him or went elsewhere. He seemed to turn off work of the highest order as easily as the sun shines or the rain falls, and just as unconsciously. A marked peculiarity with him was doing his whole duty on all occasions, without making a fuss about it. An estimate of his father's character, given in Franklin's own words, would apply equally well to himself: "His great excellence was his sound understanding, and his solid judgment in prudential matters, both in private and public affairs."

In order to trace some of these qualities towards their source, it is necessary to examine the causes at work during Franklin's early

life, and even to go back still further and learn what influences had been brought to bear on his ancestors; since the influence of heredity must in this, as in every such case, be considered. It has been wittily said by a writer—so distinguished in many ways that I hardly know whether to speak of him as a poet or a physician, but whom all will recognize as “the Autocrat of the Breakfast Table”—that a man’s education begins a hundred years before he is born. I am almost tempted to add that even then he is putting on only the finishing touches of his training. A man is a composite being, both in body and soul, with a long line of ancestry whose beginning it is impossible to trace; and every succeeding generation only helps to bind and weld together the various and innumerable qualities which make up his personality, though they be modified by countless circumstances that form his later education, and for which he alone is responsible. Of Franklin it may be said that he came of sturdy stock, none better in New England, poor in this world’s goods, but rich in faith and the hope of immortality. On both sides of the family his ancestors, as far back as the records go, were pious folk, hard-working and God-fearing. They knew the value of time and money, and they also placed a high estimate on learning and wisdom. From such a source it fell to his lot to inherit life, and his heritage was better than silver or gold.

Benjamin Franklin was born on January 6, 1706,—according to the old style of reckoning time,—in a modest dwelling near the head of Milk street, Boston. Just across the way was the South Meeting-house, belonging to the Third Church of Christ, of which Franklin’s parents were members, and at its services were constant attendants. In this sanctuary the little infant, on the day of his birth, was baptized by Samuel Willard, the minister, who duly entered the fact in the church record. With our modern ideas of sanitary precaution, it might now seem to us somewhat imprudent to take into the open air, even for a very short distance, a delicate *neonatus*, whose earthly pilgrimage was spanned by an existence of only a few hours, and to carry him to an unwarmed meeting-house, in the midst of a New England winter, even for the purpose of receiving the rite of Christian baptism; but our pious forefathers thought otherwise. At the same time, prayers were offered up for the speedy recovery of the mother; and the knowledge of this fact was a source of great comfort and consolation to the family household.

Benjamin's father, Josiah Franklin, was English-born,—coming from Northamptonshire, where the family had lived for many generations; the same county from which also the family of George Washington came. For a long period the men had been rigorous toilers, earning their livelihood by the sweat of their brow, and many of them were blacksmiths. Benjamin's mother, Abiah Folger, was a native of the island of Nantucket, and his father's second wife. Her father, Peter Folger, was a man of such distinguished probity that when he was acting as one of five commissioners appointed to measure and lay out the land on that island, it was decreed that any three out of the five might do the business provided he was one of them. What a commentary on his integrity, and what a tribute to his personal worth! The resemblance between the philosopher and Peter Folger, a later kinsman, as seen in his portrait, is very striking; and it may well have been said by his neighbors that in his younger days Benjamin favored his mother's family in looks.

Franklin's father owned a few books, mostly theological, and on these the lad used to browse, and pick up whatever he could in order to satisfy his inquiring mind, though he found it dry picking. There is no better exercise for a bright boy than to turn him loose in a library, and let him run, day after day and week after week, nibbling here and tasting there, as whim or fancy dictates.

Franklin's early surroundings were of a humble character, and his chances of brilliant success in life, as seen from a worldly point of view, were slim and discouraging. As a boy he played in the street, went barefooted in summer, fished from the wharves at flood tide, and snow-balled on the Common in winter; and he got into petty scrapes, just as other youngsters of that period did, and just as they ever will do, so long as boys are boys, because boyhood is brimful of human nature. He was no exception to the general run of youthful humanity, any further than that he was a bright, clever lad, with a good memory, and that he was fond of reading and always hated shams. He would never have been picked out of a group of urchins as one ordained to help mold the destiny of a new nation, or as one likely to stand before kings. But is it not written, "Seest thou a man diligent in business? he shall stand before kings"?

Early accustomed to habits of strict frugality, Franklin also imbibed those peculiar notions which laid the foundation of a remarkable and distinguished career. Brought up to work, he was not

afraid of labor when apprenticed as a boy in the printing-office of his brother James, the owner and editor of *The New-England Courant*, where he often did a man's stint. His early advantages at school were very limited, being confined to a period of less than two years, and that, too, before he was eleven years of age. An apprenticeship in a printing office at any time is a good school of instruction, though one hundred and seventy-five years ago Franklin did not find it an agreeable one. His experience at that time, however, stood him in good stead on many later occasions.

The question naturally comes up, "What special influences were brought to bear on the young apprentice during the plastic period of his life which made him afterward the great philosopher and the sagacious statesman, and above all the apostle of common sense?"

This is answered in part by himself in his charming *Autobiography*, where he speaks of his fondness for reading, and of the difficulty he experienced during his younger days in getting the right kind of books. He mentions by title Defoe's *Essays on Projects*, and Cotton Mather's *Essays to do Good*, otherwise called *Bonifacius*, as two works which had a lasting influence on his after-life. Defoe's book is a very rare work, so rare, indeed, that its very existence has been doubted, and it has been even asserted positively that no such book was ever written; but the assertion is wrong. It has been said, too, that Franklin had in mind, when he wrote this part of his *Autobiography*, Defoe's *Complete English Tradesman*, and that he was then thinking of this work; but it was not so. The great printer in his younger days had handled too much type to make a mistake in the title of a book. Eight or nine years before his birth *An Essay upon Projects* was published in London, written by the same author who afterward wrote that prose epic *Robinson Crusoe*, which charmed us all so much in our boyhood. In the introduction to the Essay the author terms the age in which he wrote "the projecting age," and in the body of the work he refers to many schemes which have since crystallized into practical projects, and are now considered necessary institutions of the present age. Besides other subjects he refers to Banks, Highways, Assurances, Pension Offices or Savings Banks, Friendly Societies, and Academies, all which to-day are recognized as actual problems in business life. In his chapter on "Assurances" is found the origin of modern Fire Insurance companies; and in that on "Fools," or Idiots, there is more than a suggestion of Insane Asylums and other institutions for the

care and comfort of persons who are mentally unsound. The Essay, or collection of Essays, is well written, and in style furnished a good model for the readers of that century, although now it would hardly be considered an attractive book for boys. It may be asserted, in the light of Franklin's statement, that this work gave the young philosopher a turn of thought which ever afterward he followed. In the treatment of the various subjects of the different chapters there is a decided flavor of practical wisdom for everyday use, which seems to have clung to Franklin during his whole life.

The other little book mentioned in the *Autobiography* was first published in the year 1710; and, as the author was settled as a colleague pastor over the church where the Franklin family was then attending worship, it seems natural that the work should have been introduced at an early period into the Franklin household, where it surely found eager readers. The book is scarcely ever looked at nowadays, much less is it ever read; but it contains some grains of wheat scattered through the chaff. The following extracts from its pages are quite Franklinesque in their character:

Take a Catalogue of all your more **Distant Relatives**. . . . Think; *Wherein may I pursue the Good of such a Relative* (page 72)?

Have alwayes lying by you, a List of the *Poor* in your Neighbourhood (page 75).

You must not think of making the *Good* you do, a pouring of Water into a Pump, to draw out something for your selves (page 78).

Do Good unto those Neighbours, who will *Speak Ill* of you, after you have done it (page 80).

Often mention the Condition of the *Poor*, in your Conversation with the *Rich* (page 100).

The *Wind* feeds no body, yet it may turn the *Mill*, which will grind the *Corn*, that may Feed the *Poor* (page 101).

To *Bear Evil* is to *Do Good* (page 103).

One Small Man, thus *Nicking the Time* for it, may do wonders (page 179)!

At a very early period in his life Franklin had acquired a great mastery of language, and an excellent style in writing. It was clear and terse, and left no doubt as to the meaning he intended to convey. This high art is rare, and more easily recognized than described. In many ways it is the man himself, and shows him off from every point of view. It is never learned by rote, but comes largely by practice, and also by familiarity with the works of good

writers. Franklin was a close reader, and in his boyhood devoured everything in the shape of a book within the reach of his limited means. He studied Locke's *Essay on the Human Understanding*,—a work to which many a man has acknowledged a debt of gratitude for its help in mental training. He had also read Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, and a stray volume of *The Spectator*, both excellent models for a young man to copy. In one of his Almanacks, Franklin says that Addison's "writings have contributed more to the improvement of the minds of the *British* nation, and polishing their manners, than those of any other *English* pen whatever." While yet a printer's apprentice he wrote articles for his brother's newspaper, the authorship of which was at first unknown to the editor; and he also wrote doggerel rhymes, in those days often called "vases," which he hawked about the streets of Boston and sold for a trifle. In this modest way he earned a few extra shillings and laid the foundation of a brilliant career. Who can say now that his success in after-life was not in some manner connected with the narrow circumstances of the young ballad-maker?

As at that time the drama was not regarded with favor by the good people of Boston, I have often wondered if Franklin in his boyhood had ever read any of Shakespeare's plays. The original settlers of Massachusetts abhorred playwrights, and looked with distrust upon everything connected with the theatrical stage. Even in his boyhood Franklin had such a keen appreciation of what is great and grand, and such a lively concern for all things human, that it would be of interest now to know that he, too, had paid silent homage at the shrine of the "sweet swan of Avon." In *The New-England Courant* of July 2, 1722, there is a bare allusion to "Shakespear's Works," which is probably the first time that the name of the great dramatist is mentioned in New England literature. It occurs in a list of books made by an anonymous correspondent, as belonging to himself, which would come handy "in writing on Subjects Natural, Moral, and Divine, and in cultivating those which seem the most Barren." The whole communication reads not unlike the effusions of the young printer, and may have been written by him.

The circumstances under which Franklin left home are too well known to be repeated here. Youthful indiscretions can never be defended successfully, but they may be forgotten, or passed over in silence.

From his native town Franklin went to Philadelphia, with no recommendations and an utter stranger; but fortunately before leaving home he had learned to set type. The knowledge of this art gave the friendless boy a self-reliance that proved to be of practical help, and laid the foundation of his future fame. During a long life he never forgot the fact that he was a printer first, and Minister Plenipotentiary from the United States of America to the Court of France afterward; and still later President of the State of Pennsylvania. In his last will and testament he sets forth these distinctive titles in the order given here; and in his own epitaph, which he wrote as a young man, he styles himself simply "Printer." This epitaph is a celebrated bit of literature, quaint and full of figurative expression, and has often been re-printed. It bears a remote resemblance to some lines at the end of a Funeral Elegy on John Foster, a graduate of Harvard College and the pioneer printer of Boston, who died on September 9, 1681. The Elegy was written by Joseph Capen, then a recent graduate of the same institution, and was first published as a broadside. Perhaps the lines suggested to Franklin his own epitaph. As a bright boy with an inquisitive turn of mind, he was familiar with the main incidents in the life of Foster, who had set up the first printing-press in Boston, and was probably the earliest engraver in New England.

After Franklin had become fairly domiciled at his new home in Philadelphia, one of his chief aims was to make himself useful not only to his fellow-artisans, but to the community at large. In divers ways he strove to raise the condition of young men, and to impress upon them the responsibilities of life and the duty they owed to others.

In the year 1732 Franklin began to publish *Poor Richard's Almanack*, which not only put money in his purse but made his name a household word throughout the land. It soon reached a wide circulation, and was kept up by him for twenty-five years. It was largely read by the people of the middle colonies and had great influence over the masses. From every available source he selected shrewd and homely maxims, and scattered them through the pages of the publication. So popular did these sayings become that they were reprinted on sheets, under the title of "The Way to Wealth," and circulated in England as well as in this country, and were even translated into French and sold in the streets of Paris. They are not so highly thought of now as they once were; and the more the

pity. The present age likes show and style better than quiet ease and domestic comfort, and is sometimes called the gilded age, to distinguish it from one that is not veneered. The pseudonym of authorship on the title-page of the *Almanack* was Richard Saunders, and in quoting these maxims the public often used the expression, "as Poor Richard says," referring to the pseudonym; and in this way the name of Poor Richard has become inseparably connected with that of Franklin. During the latter part of the seventeenth century there had been printed in London an almanack by Richard Saunders, and Franklin, doubtless, there found the name. In fact his own title-page begins, "Poor Richard improved;" showing that it had some reference to a previous publication.

A curious circumstance, connected with the translation of these proverbs into French, may be worth narrating. The translator found a difficulty in rendering "Poor Richard" into his vernacular tongue, as *Richard* in French means a rich man; and to give a poor rich man as the author of the sayings was an absurdity on the face of it. So the translator compromised by rendering the name of the author as "Bonhomme Richard;" and Paul Jones's famous ship was so called in honor of the Boston printer and the Philadelphia philosopher.

Franklin never accepted results without carefully examining reasons, and even as a boy was slow to take statements on trust, always wanting to know the why and wherefore of things. By temperament he was a doubter; but in the end such persons make the best believers. Once drive away the mist of unbelief from their minds, and the whole heavens become clear. With the eye of faith they then see what has previously been denied to them. Franklin did not set up for a saint, or pretend to be what he was not; and his friends have never claimed that he was free from human failings. They have always looked with regret at his youthful errors, and would willingly blot them out; but he himself has freely confessed them all. It is on his own testimony alone that the world knows his worst faults. "To err is human, to forgive divine."

Franklin was a voluminous writer on a large variety of subjects, but of all his works the *Autobiography* has been the most widely circulated. This book was first published soon after his death, and has since passed through many editions. It has been translated into numerous languages and been read throughout Christendom,

where it has charmed both the old and the young; and the demand for it still continues. For close, compact style and for general interest it has become almost a classic work in the English language. The bibliographical history of the book is somewhat peculiar, and makes a story worth telling.

Presumably an Autobiography, published after the death of the writer, would remain substantially unchanged; but it was not so with Franklin's. At four different times there have appeared in English four versions of the *Autobiography*, each one varying from the others,—though they have not always covered the same period of time,—thus making great and decided changes throughout the book. The explanation of this anomaly may be found in the following statement. The narrative was written at various times and places, and the author has given some of the circumstances under which it was prepared. The first part, coming down to his marriage in the year 1730, was written at Twyford, England, in 1771, while he was visiting at the house of his friend, Dr. Jonathan Shipley, Bishop of Saint Asaph, with whom he was on terms of close intimacy. It was begun for the gratification of his own family, and intended for them alone; but afterward it took a wider scope, and was then evidently meant for publication. He did not resume work upon it until 1784; but in the meantime the incomplete sketch had been shown to some of his friends, who urged him strongly to go on with it. The second part of these memoirs, written while Franklin was living at Passy, near Paris, is short and made up largely of his ideas on life rather than by the recital of events. When he began this portion of the narrative, he did not have the former part with him, which accounts for a break in the thread of the story. The third part was begun in August, 1788, while Franklin was in Philadelphia, and is brought down to the year 1757. This portion ended the *Autobiography*, as formerly printed in English. About a year after Franklin's death there was published in Paris a French translation of the first part of the memoirs. It is a little singular that the principal portion of the *Autobiography*, which was destined to have so great a popularity, should have been printed first in a foreign land and in a foreign tongue; and it has never been satisfactorily explained why this was so, nor is it known with certainty who made the translation from the English into the French.

In 1793, two years after the appearance of the Paris edition, two

separate and distinct translations were made from it and published in London,—the one by the Messrs. Robinson, and the other by Mr. J. Parsons. Both editions appeared about the same time; and probably some rivalry between two publishing firms was at the bottom of it. They were English translations from a French translation of the original English; and yet, with the drawback of all these changes, the book has proved to be as charming as a novel.

In 1818 William Temple Franklin, while editing his grandfather's works, brought out another edition of the *Autobiography*, which seemed to have the mark of genuineness; and for half a century this version was the accepted one. But in 1868 even this edition had to yield to a fourth version, which gave the *ipsisima verba* of the great philosopher. During that year another edition was published from Franklin's original manuscript, which a short time previously had fallen into the hands of the Hon. John Bigelow, while he was United States Minister at the French Court; and by him it was carefully and critically annotated. This version now forms the standard edition of the *Autobiography*, and easily supersedes all former versions. It contains, moreover, six or eight additional pages of printed matter from Franklin's pen, which had never before appeared in English. It is also a curious fact in the history of the book that there are no less than five editions in French, all distinct and different translations.

The limits of this paper will not allow me to follow Franklin in his various wanderings either back to his native town or across the ocean to London, where he worked as a journeyman printer. Nor can I even mention the different projects he devised for improving the condition of all classes of mankind, from the highest to the lowest, and thereby adding to the comforts and pleasures of life. The recollection of his own narrow circumstances during his younger days always prompted him to help others similarly placed; and the famous line of Terence applied to him as truthfully as to any other man of the last century. In brief, it is enough to say that on all occasions and at all times his sympathies were with the people. In the great political contest which really began on the passage of the Stamp Act, and did not end until the Declaration of Peace in 1783, he was from the first on the side of the Colonists, and one of their main supports. During the War of the Revolu-

tion he was a venerable man, the senior of General Washington by more than twenty-five years, and the leaders all looked up to him for advice. In such an emergency it is young men for action, but old men for counsel; and on all occasions he was a wise counselor.

Franklin's services in Europe as one of the Commissioners of the United States were as essential to the success of the patriots as those of any military commander at home; and he gave as much time and thought to the public cause, and with as marked results, as if he had led legions of men on the battlefield. The pen is mightier than the sword, and the triumphs of diplomacy are equally important with those of generals who lead armies on to victory.

I regret that the space of time allowed forbids me to dwell, as I should like to do, on Franklin's brilliant career as a philosopher. From early boyhood his inquiring mind had led him to study the lessons of Nature and to learn the hidden meaning of her mysteries. It is easy to understand how, while yet a young man, his youthful imagination became excited over the wonders of the heavens, when the lightning flashed and the thunder pealed; and how he burned to find out the causes of the phenomena. By his ingenious experiments in the investigation of these matters, and by his brilliant discoveries made before he had reached the middle period of his life, he acquired throughout Europe a reputation as a philosopher; and the results of his labors were widely published in France and Germany, as well as in England. In his memoirs he gives a brief account of the way he was drawn into scientific studies, and how the seed was sown which brought forth the ripened fruit; but the preparation of the soil in which the seed was planted dates back to his childhood, when he was reading Defoe, Mather, and other writers, or even to an earlier period. For a full quarter of a century before the Revolutionary War broke out, he had gained such fame in Europe for his attainments, and was so widely known for his fairness, that, when acting as a diplomatist during the political troubles of the Colonies, great weight was always given to his opinions.

By the help of that subtle power which Franklin's genius first described, audible speech is now conveyed to far distant places, messages are sent instantaneously across the continent and under the seas, and the words of Puck have become a reality:

"I'll put a girdle round about the earth
In forty minutes."

Through the aid of this mysterious agency, dwellings and thoroughfares are illuminated, and means of transit multiplied in the streets of crowded cities, where it is made to take the place of the horse; and yet to-day mankind stands only on the threshold of its possibilities.

Whether the career of the practical printer or of the sagacious statesman or of the profound philosopher be considered, Franklin's life was certainly a remarkable one. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to name another man so distinguished in a triple character and so fully equipped in all his parts. By dint of genius alone, he arose to high eminence, and took his place with the great men of the age, where he was easily their peer, and where he maintained his rank until the day of his death.

One of Franklin's early acts, fraught with great benefit to scholarship, was the founding, one hundred and fifty years ago, of the American Philosophical Society, the oldest scientific body in America and one of the oldest in any country,—whose numerous publications, covering a broad variety of subjects and extending over a period of nearly its whole existence, have won for it a proud eminence, and given it high rank among the learned societies of the world.

On this interesting anniversary it falls to my lot to bring to you the felicitations of the Massachusetts Historical Society, which was founded in Franklin's native town and is the oldest association of its kind in the United States. The younger sister on this occasion sends her warmest greetings, and instructs me to express the hope that the same success and prosperity which have followed your growth during a long life of honor and usefulness may continue to abide with you, undiminished and unabated, for long generations to come.

