

Benjamin Franklin

by L. Carroll Judson

The name of BENJAMIN FRANKLIN, conspicuous upon the pages of European and American biography, ever commands peculiar respect and veneration. It is surrounded with a rich variety, as rare as it is instructive and interesting.

Franklin was born at Boston, on the 17th of January, 1706, exactly ninety years before my humble self. His father was among the puritans who fled before persecution, and sought repose in the wilds of Massachusetts. His parents were poor, but honest and esteemed. Poverty is ever inconvenient, but has not always been a disgrace. Honesty and industry were formerly the brightest stars on the escutcheon of fame.

Franklin manifested a taste for improvement at an early age, and exhibited talents of a superior order. His pious parents encouraged his education as far as their limited means would permit, and were anxious to see him prepared for the pulpit; but necessity compelled his father to take him from school at the age of ten years, and place him in his shop, to aid him in the prosecution of the chandler business. But this did not paralyze his native genius. Original in every trait of his character, eccentric in his manner, and the child of nature and experiment, he commenced the study of practical philosophy, amidst candle wicks, tallow, and soap. He went through the experiments of ascertaining the precise quantity of sleep and food requisite to supply the wants of nature, and the kind most conducive to health. At this early age, he adopted rules of temperance, frugality, and economy, worthy of imitation, and adorned with all the system of mature age. He also accustomed himself to meet and bear disappointments with philosophic fortitude. He continued to improve his mind by reading, for which he had an insatiable thirst. Nothing passed by him unnoticed, and his expanding genius drew philosophy from nature, from things, and from men. He reasoned, analyzed, moralized, and improved, from every thing he saw. Hence the vast expansion of his gigantic genius, comprehending at one bold view, through after life, the philosophy of mind, of nature, of science, of art, of government, of society, and all the relations of creation, from the dust under his feet, through the myriads of animalculæ in a drop of water, up to the bright seraphs of the skies. A mind like his could not long be confined in a chandler's shop. Open and honest in his disposition, he communicated his wish of moving in some other sphere, to his father. After an examination of the various trades, and working a short time with a cutler, he was bound to his brother, to learn the art of a printer. He soon became master of his profession, and left a shining example for all apprentices, by adding to his industry in business the improvement of his mind during every leisure hour—a happy prelude to his glorious and useful career through future life.

So intensely bent on the acquisition of knowledge was Franklin, that he often preferred his book to his meal, and studied whole nights, in defiance of the commands and entreaties of Morpheus. As he was paid a weekly sum for his board, he adopted a course of simple vegetable diet, by which he saved money to purchase books. He manifested a correct taste and a sound judgment in the selection of authors and subjects. Among them, he studied with admiration and attention the Memorabilia of Xenophon, and became one of the closest imitators of Socrates, in his mode of reasoning and habits of life, to be found on record. Before he became versed in the rules of propriety, he often gave offence by the bold and obstinate manner in which he advanced and maintained his opinions.

He now commenced his literary career; and, as is most usually the case with young authors, he offered

his first sacrifice to Calliope, in a strain of rhyming ideas. His poetry was applauded, but his father, who was a man of sound judgment, cured him of his poetic mania, by turning his verses into ridicule; at the same time encouraging him to improve his talents by writing prose. Suspicious of his own ability, fearing the shafts of criticism, he managed to have several of his productions published in the paper edited by his brother, in so clandestine a manner, that no one could know the author. When he found they met with general admiration, his vanity, as he says, did not let the world long remain ignorant of the writer.

Being flattered by praise and attention from others, he began to feel his importance, which resulted in an open rupture between him and his brother, to whom he was an apprentice. For some time, he endured a course of harsh treatment, but at length resolved to free himself from the chains of bondage. He soon found an opportunity of embarking for New York, where he arrived in safety. Not being able to obtain business there, he bent his course towards the city of Philadelphia, on foot, and alone. On his arrival there, he had but one solitary dollar left; was a stranger, and only seventeen years of age; and, without business, must soon be dependent on the cold charities of the world for his bed and board. On entering Market street, his eccentric appearance excited the gaze of the multitude, as much as his towering talents subsequently did the gaze of the world. He had a roll of bread under each arm, and, approaching the Delaware, he sat down and feasted upon his bread and the pure water from the river. His pockets were projected to an enormous size with the various articles of his wardrobe, and, on the whole, his corpulent appearance was not in bad keeping with old Boniface.

Although there were but two printing offices in Philadelphia, he succeeded in obtaining employment in one, as compositor. He now reduced all his theories of economy to successful practice, maintaining himself at a trifling expense, pursuing a correct and industrious career, which gained for him the esteem of all his acquaintances. Among others, his talents attracted the attention of Sir William Keith, then Governor of the province, who invited him to his house and treated him with great kindness.

The governor was a man whose liberality in promises, often went beyond the means of his purse. Anxious to see his young friend placed in more auspicious circumstances by his benefaction, he proposed to set him up in business, and sent him to London, with letters of high commendation, to obtain the necessary materials for his new enterprise. On his arrival there, he was much chagrined to find that no pecuniary arrangements were made by his new benefactor, and he found himself in a strange land without money to enable him to return. But this was only another lesson of experience, in whose school he delighted to study; and, instead of sitting down under the weight of disappointment and dejection, he soon obtained employment, and, by his skill and industry, gained the confidence and esteem of all his new acquaintances. After residing there for eighteen months he took passage for Philadelphia on the 22nd of July, 1726. On his way home he concocted a set of rules to govern his actions through future life, of the following substance:

I resolve to be frugal; to speak truth at all times; never to raise expectations not to be realized; to be sincere; to be industrious; to be stable; to speak ill of no man; to cover, rather than expose the faults of others; and to do all the good I can to my fellow men.

Upon this foundation of native granite he built a superstructure, as beautiful and enduring as the proudest memorials of Greece and Rome.

He arrived at Philadelphia on the 11th of October, and engaged with the merchant, who owned the goods brought in by the ship in which he came, as a clerk. The same industry and success attended him in the counting-house that cheered him at the press, showing clearly that his talents were of a rare and

rich variety. His future prospects in this new department brightened before him, but were suddenly prostrated by the death of his employer, which threw him back into his former trade. For a few months he worked for his old master, but finding a partner who had more money than skill, they commenced business on their own account. His industry and exertions were now put in full requisition: he manned his own wheelbarrow in collecting materials for business, and put nature on short allowance, until he should acquire enough to be free from debt. His industry, punctuality, and correct deportment, gained him many valuable and influential friends, through whose patronage he was enabled to extend his business, and shake off his partner, who had become worse than worthless, by embarrassing and retarding the business of the firm. Up to this era in his life, Franklin had been emphatically fortune's foot-ball. His life had been a complete checker-board of changing vicissitudes, blasted hopes, and keen disappointments. But, amidst all the stormy trials that had tossed his youthful bark to and fro, surrounded by the foaming torrents of vice, he never became tarnished by corruption, or degraded by the commission of a base or mean action. The moral principles deeply planted in his bosom by parental instruction during his childhood, were as lasting as his life; a happy illustration of the good effects of faithfulness in parents towards their children.

Having now become liberated from his partner in business, he began to feel the necessity and propriety of choosing another, to fill up the vacuum in his side, and share with him the joys and sorrows that awaited him on this mundane sphere of action. Accordingly, in 1730, he entered into a partnership for life with a widow lady, whose maiden name was Read, and for whom he had contracted an attachment previous to her first marriage. In him she found a kind husband, and in her he found a much more agreeable partner than his former one.

Philanthropy predominated in the heart of Franklin; to better the condition of his fellow men, was pleasure to his soul. The rules governing the "Junto," formed by him, and now merged in the Philosophical Society, show a superior knowledge of human nature, and of the duty men owe to the creature and the Creator. They breathe universal charity, kindness, benevolence, and good will to all mankind. Among them is one for the suppression of intemperance, a prophetic prelude to the exertions of the present day in this cause.

Franklin had profited by the experience of the past, and was now enabled to steer clear of the numerous rocks and quicksands of error, on which so many are ruined and lost. Although he rode in many a storm, prosperity beamed upon him from this time onward, through a long life of usefulness. His new partner smiled upon him, his friends esteemed him, and in the pleasures of the present, past pains were forgotten.

In 1732, he commenced the publication of "Poor Richard's Almanac," which he continued until 1737, circulating 10,000 copies annually. Although under an humble title, it was a work of great merit, being replete with maxims and rules calculated for every day use in the various relations of life. It gained great celebrity in Europe, and was translated into various languages.

About this time he commenced the publication of a newspaper, which was conducted with great ability, free from all scurrility, and a messenger of truth. Would to God the same could be said of all the public prints of the present day.

He continued to pursue his studies, until he added to general science a knowledge of the French, Italian, Spanish, and Latin languages. By the "Junto" a small library was commenced, which formed the first stepping stone to the present city collection. He wrote and published a highly interesting pamphlet on the necessity of a paper currency, and added much to his literary fame by the production of various

essays, written in his truly original style. He filled, successively and successfully, the situation of state printer, clerk of the General Assembly, and post-master of Philadelphia. He used unwearied exertions to increase municipal improvement in the city, by the organization of fire companies, lighting and improving the streets, regulating the watch, and reducing every thing to that system, order, and harmony, so congenial to his mind. He was the patron and father of the Philosophical Society, the Pennsylvania University and Hospital; and contributed, in every way he could, to advance the glory and prosperity of his adopted home, and the happiness and peace of his fellow citizens. All the important enterprises, both in the city and province, during these days of his towering fame, were either originated by him, or were more rapidly advanced by his wisdom and counsel; and scarcely any project was undertaken without his approving sanction.

In 1741, he commenced the publication of a “General Magazine,” which contained much useful matter, but was less acceptable than his previous writings, being in part devoted to the litigated points of divinity.

The mechanic arts were also much improved by him. He brought to their aid philosophy and chemistry, and combined them with science, economy, and nature. He improved the chimneys, constructed a stove, and proposed many useful and economical corrections in domestic concerns, from the garret to the cellar, from the plough to the mill. Science acknowledged his master spirit, the arts hailed him as their patron, the lightning bowed in subjection to his magic rod, and nature claimed him as her favourite son.

In 1744, he was elected a member of the provincial assembly, where he was continued for ten successive years. Although not a popular speaker, his clear head and sound judgment, as a legislator and a statesman, gave him an influence over that body before unknown.

During the years he was serving his country in the assembly, he also served in the fields of experimental philosophy, and explained many of the mysterious phenomena of nature, that spread his fame to the remotest bounds of the civilized world. His discoveries in electricity alone, were sufficient to have immortalized his name. He was the first man on record who imparted magnetism to steel—melted metals, killed animals, and fired gunpowder by means of electricity; and the first who conceived and reduced to practice, the method of conducting lightning from the clouds to the points of steel rods, and, by them, harmless to the ground. All the elements and fluids, the air, sea, and land, underwent the close investigation of his vast, his philosophic mind.

In 1758, he was sent to Carlisle to conclude a treaty with the Indians; and in the following year, to Albany, to meet a congress of commissioners, to arrange means of defence against the threatened hostilities of the French and savages. He there submitted a plan that met with the unanimous approbation of the commissioners, but was so republican in its features, as to be rejected by those who had at heart the interests of their king more than the happiness of the colonists.

On the decease of the deputy post-master general of America, Franklin succeeded him, and raised the department from a state of embarrassment and expense, to a fruitful source of revenue to the crown.

About this time difficulties arose between the proprietors and government in the province of Pennsylvania, which were finally referred to the mother country for adjustment, and Franklin was sent to England in June, 1757, as advocate for the province. With his usual industry and address, he performed the duties of his mission, the difficulties were adjusted, and in 1762, he returned, received a vote of thanks from the assembly, and a compensation of five hundred pounds. He was now variously

employed in regulating the post-office department, making treaties with the Indians, and devising means of defence on the frontiers: every department of government feeling his beneficial influence. New difficulties arose between the assembly and the proprietors, and, in 1764, Franklin again sailed for England, with instructions to obtain the entire abolishment of proprietary authority. On his arrival there, he was called upon to perform more important and perilous duties. The plan for taxing the colonies had been long agitated, and was now matured by the British ministry. This project Franklin had opposed from the beginning, and he was now arraigned to answer numerous accusations brought against him by the enemies of liberty. On the 3d of February, 1766, he appeared before the House of Commons to undergo a public examination. He was found equal to the task; his enemies were astounded at his logic, boldness, dignity, and skill; and his friends were filled with admiration at the able manner he confuted every accusation, and defended the rights and interests of his native country. Amidst the attacks of artifice and insolence of power, he stood unmoved, and firm as a marble statue. He remained in England eleven years as the agent of the colonies, opposing the encroachments of the crown upon the rights of Americans; and, during the whole time, all the combined efforts of malice, flattery, and intrigue, were unable to ensnare or intimidate him. He became acquainted with the etiquette, corruptions, and devices of diplomacy; but never bent his knee to Baal, or kissed the hand of a crowned head.

Matters had now arrived at a crisis that induced his departure for his long neglected home. His personal safety in England, and the need of his public services in his own country, admonished him to return. He accordingly embarked, and arrived at Philadelphia in the beginning of May, 1775. He was received with marked attention and esteem, and immediately elected to the continental congress, adding new lustre and dignity to that august body, and enrolling his name among the signers of the Declaration of Independence. Notwithstanding he had used every exertion to reconcile difficulties with Great Britain, and believed his country was yet too weak to achieve its independence, his course was now onward, resolved, with his patriotic colleagues, on liberty or death.

The talents of Franklin were now had in constant requisition, both by his own state and in the general congress. He was always selected to meet the agents of the crown, who were at various times commissioned to offer terms of inglorious peace. They always found in him the firm uncompromising advocate of liberty; the shrewd and wary politician; the bold and zealous defender of the rights of his bleeding country. The disasters of the American army during the campaign of 1778, induced congress to apply to France for assistance. All eyes were turned on Franklin to perform this important mission. In October, 1776, he embarked upon this delicate embassy, and, after a most vigilant intercession, succeeded in concluding a treaty of alliance with that nation, on the 6th of February, 1778, to the great joy of himself and his suffering countrymen. When the news of this alliance reached England, the ministry were much alarmed, and despatched messengers to Paris to endeavour to induce Franklin to enter into a compromise. All was in vain. To Mr. Hutton and others, who came to him with the olive branch of peace, he replied: "I never think of your ministry and their abettors, but with the image strongly painted in my view of their hands red and dropping with the blood of my countrymen, friends and relations. No peace can be signed by those hands, unless you drop all pretensions to govern us, meet us on equal terms, and avoid all occasions of future discord."

He met all their intrigues at the threshold, and they became convinced that the hardy yeomanry of America were not to be dragooned, flattered, or driven from the bold position they had assumed. During the numerous interviews he had with these emissaries, (I can call them by no milder term,) Franklin was cautioned by Mr. Heartley to beware of his personal safety, which had been repeatedly threatened. He thanked his friend and assured him he felt no alarm, that he had nearly finished a long life, and that the short remainder was of no great value. He ironically remarked: "Perhaps the best use

such an old fellow can be put to, is to make a martyr of him.”

If it required much skill and perseverance to negotiate an alliance with France, it required more to preserve it. A republican form of government is ever repugnant to kingly power. That the French in America would imbibe liberal principles, was a matter of course. That the thrones of Europe would be endangered on their return, was truly predicted. By this course of ingenious reasoning, the British ministers exerted a powerful influence against the continuation of the alliance. But the eagle eye of Franklin penetrated, anticipated, and frustrated all their dark schemes of intrigue; and, in the event, they were compelled to comply with his terms of peace, acknowledge the independence of the colonies, and retire, defeated, disgraced, and humbled. In the arduous duties of settling definitive preliminaries of peace, Franklin was aided by Messrs. Adams, Jay, and Laurens. These duties were closed, and a definitive treaty concluded with Great Britain and the United States at Paris on the 3d of September, 1783.

Although anxious to be discharged from further public service, it was not until 1785, that Franklin was permitted to return to his beloved country, where he could breathe the pure air of republican freedom, no longer polluted by kingly power. During this time he had concluded treaties between the United States and the kings of Sweden and Prussia. On his departure from Europe every mark of respect was paid to him by kings, by courts, by the literati, and by all classes of society that the most towering ambition could desire. He was clothed with the mantle of love and unfading glory. His reputation was perched sublimely on the loftiest pinnacle fame could rear. He had been a pillow of fire to the American cause, and a pillar of smoke to the enemies of human rights.

At the age of eighty years, borne down by fatigue and disease, he returned to Philadelphia. He was hailed with enthusiastic joy, esteem, and respect by all the friends of liberty, from the humblest citizen up to the illustrious Washington.

Notwithstanding his advanced age, and his great anxiety to retire from the public gaze, he was soon appointed Governor of Pennsylvania—and subsequently, in 1787, elected a delegate to the convention that framed the federal constitution. Many of the bright traits of that matchless instrument received their finishing stroke from his master hand. Early in 1790, his infirmities of body confined him to his room, but his immortal mind remained unimpaired. When approaching rapidly the confines of eternity, he still looked with anxious solicitude upon the interests of the young republic. He still continued to benefit mankind by his writings and counsels. Some of the strongest and most vivid productions from his pen were written during his confinement. His diseases continued to increase, and on the 17th of April, 1790, calm and resigned, cool and collected, peaceful and happy, he resigned his spirit into the hands of his Creator—quitted this vale of tears, and slumbered, quietly and sweetly, in the arms of death—in the full faith of rising to a glorious immortality in realms of bliss beyond the skies.

By his will he prohibited all pomp and parade at his funeral. He was anxious that the plain republican manner of his long and useful life, should be strictly observed in the mournful obsequies of his interment. He was buried on the 21st of April, in the north-west corner of Christ Church yard, where a plain marble slab, even with the surface of the earth, points to where he lies. With his, moulders the dust of his wife, with whom he had lived in harmony and peace. No other inscription is upon the tomb except his and her name.

His death was deeply lamented throughout the civilized world. Congress ordered mourning to be observed throughout the United States one month. The event was solemnized, and many eulogies pronounced in France. The National Assembly decreed that each of its members should wear a badge

of mourning on the occasion for three days. The sensations produced there by his death, were as imposing and interesting, and celebrated with as much devotion as those recently witnessed in our own country on the death of La Fayette.

In reviewing the life of this great benefactor of mankind, we find a richer variety to admire than in that of any individual upon the historic page. In whatever station he moved he was a luminary of the first magnitude. He entered upon the stage of action at a time when the world needed just such a man; and continued upon it just long enough to finish all he had begun. He was found just equal to every work he undertook, and always stopped at the golden point of the finishing stroke—a modest hint for me to close. You who profess to admire his virtues, talents, and usefulness, prove your sincerity by imitating his examples.

Source:

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