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ANKLIN—HIS GENIUS, LIFE, AND CHARACTER

AN

ORATION

DELIVERED BEFORE THE

N. Y. TYPOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY,

ON THE OCCASION OF

The Birthday of Franklin,

AT THE

PRINTERS' FESTIVAL,

HELD JANUARY 17, 1849

BY

JOHN L. JEWETT.

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PUBLISHED BY ORDER OF THE SOCIETY.  
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New-York, Jan. 20, 1849.

Mr. J. L. JEWETT:—

SIR: In behalf of the NEW-YORK TYPOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY, and for ourselves, we have the honour of expressing our gratification with the Oration delivered by yourself before the Society, at the late Anniversary of Franklin's Birthday, Jan. 17, and request a copy of the same for publication by the Society.

Yours respectfully,

B. R. BARLOW, }
C. C. SAVAGE, } *Committee.*
R. H. JOHNSTON, }

New-York, Jan. 23, 1849.

GENTLEMEN:—

In acknowledging your favour of the 20th instant, permit me to tender to yourselves, and, through you, to the members of our time-honoured Society, and to the Typographical Profession generally in the city of New-York, my warmest thanks for the cordial reception proffered me on the occasion alluded to, and for the attention bestowed upon my remarks throughout; as well as for innumerable acts of kindness and courtesy received at their hands during an intercourse that has extended through many years.

I feel pleasure in complying with your request; not so much from the intrinsic value of the production, as from the hope that it may, in connexion with the occasion that called it forth, do something to awaken our brother printers, and others into whose hands the discourse may fall, to a renewed and more diligent study and imitation of the life and virtues of the truly great and good man whose Birthday we have just commemorated.

I remain, gentlemen,

Your obedient servant,

J. L. JEWETT.

To Messrs. B. R. BARLOW, }
C. C. SAVAGE, } *Committee.*
R. H. JOHNSTON, }

O R A T I O N .

IT is permitted to every human being, at some early stage of his existence, to enjoy a season of comparative purity and innocence,—a season of unselfish and devout aspiration to live in harmony with every kindred intelligence. From this, as from a landmark, he takes as it were his departure, when entering, freighted with its responsibilities, upon the perilous voyage of life. And as the mariner, becalmed in tropical seas, fevered and exhausted with vertical heats, yearns and sighs for his native land, until his parting glimpses of its green fields and meadows rise in vision before him; so also does the voyager upon the sea of life, weary and soul-sick with its heartless strifes and maddening passions, recur to his sad farewell of the native home of his mind,—to its season of peace and purity,—until it rises in recollection like the last rays of a beautiful sunset—the golden age of his early unclouded years. Experience unfortunately teaches us, that to many individuals their residence in

this Eden of the mind must be briefer than a summer's morning. Still, we have reason to believe that no one is wholly destitute of some cherished remembrance, some oasis in the desert of his memory, from which an influence ever and anon steals into the mind, like breezes blown from the spice-islands of youth and hope. Sad indeed is it for us, when no voice is echoed from the repose of by-gone years,—when even memory fails to renew the golden age of our youth; for around it cluster all our hopes of peace. It is the nucleus about which are gathered, as by a celestial magnetism, all our desires for true moral and spiritual advancement,—all our aspirations worthily to fulfil the high ends of our being.

There is something analogous to this individual experience in the history of Nations and States—of Societies and Associations; all have their golden age. Whatever opinions may be formed of what are generally considered the fabulous ages of antiquity, it is historically true that our own country at least, and many of the countries of modern Europe, have had their golden age.

Who can read the history of good King Alfred of England, and contemplate his simple uprightness of heart, and his manly virtues, and not feel that his was the golden age of his country? And who does not see that the memory of his virtues has been the lamp that in every age has guided the feet of the noblest of our English ancestors,—that his valiant deeds have been the torch that has never ceased to kindle the flame of patriotism in their breasts?

France, too, had her golden age in the reign of Saint Louis, who administered justice to his people in person, reclining against an oak in the forest of Vincennes ; and in the sainted Maid of Orleans, who to peerless beauty, and all womanly virtues, united martial enthusiasm and prowess that rescued her country for ever from the yoke of the invader, and drove mailed knights and haughty captains in terror and disgrace from her soil. At the bare mention of these names, every true-hearted Frenchman feels that the highest and holiest sentiments of his nature are summoned to go forth into action.

Need we say that the serene majesty encircling like a halo of light the head of our WASHINGTON, will for ever stamp the era of his life as the golden age of our own beloved country ? Not indeed the age of her outward success and prosperity—not her age of gold—for she was then in her hour of dark trial and deadly conflict—but the age when were sown those genuine seeds of public and private virtue that gave promise of so golden a harvest. How glorious a legacy to the youth of America is the history of his unequalled patriotism and devotion—his faith, and firmness, and self-sacrifice, in the thickest night of his country's despondency ; his own gallant achievements, and his unfeigned joy at the achievements of others ; his freedom from all vulgar ambition, and the spotless purity of his unostentatious life ! Who can tell, amid the degeneracy into which we have undoubtedly fallen, and to which we cannot wholly shut our eyes,—who can tell the amount of vaulting ambition that has been

nipped in the bud, the corruption that has blushed to see the fair face of day, in consequence of the severe rebuke, silently but effectually administered to every unhallowed purpose by the memory alone of the Father of his country? Can we think of him, and not feel that his virtues possess a creative power, a fructifying life, that will cause them to spring up anew, and be re-embodied again and again, in every succeeding age?

Societies, associations, and every body of men organized for the attainment of a specific purpose, or for the performance of an important function in the community—these too, as well as individuals and states, have a golden age in their history. It will of course be seen that outward prosperity, pecuniary success, or even the apparent attainment of the ends for which men associate, are not necessarily included in our idea of a golden age. The annals of every organized society or fraternity will furnish abundant evidence of the fact we aim to elucidate. Each and all of them look back to some period in their history, when the ends and objects of the institution, its capabilities for beneficent action, the purposes it aimed to accomplish, the importance of the use it designed to perform, were pre-eminently well understood, and held in their genuine simplicity. Each and all of them refer to some individual whose intellectual endowments, whose moral worth and integrity, whose devotion to the true ends of the institution, entitle him to be held in grateful remembrance by his successors—some one whose example is constantly held up to incite to praiseworthy action.

It is in this spirit, and for this purpose, that we have met this evening to do honour to the **BIRTHDAY OF FRANKLIN**. We are assembled to burn no unhallowed incense at any shrine—to bow in servile worship of no mere man like ourselves. But we have met to refresh our minds with a recollection of the wise maxims and virtuous deeds of a philosopher and a sage ; we would quicken ourselves to renewed exertions in the path of duty, by recalling the noble example of one endeared to us by the ties of a common profession, by and through which we proffer a claim which he himself would not have shamed to acknowledge.

We seek not to monopolize the glory of Franklin's name ; we would indulge no spirit of exclusiveness in relation to one who was an honour not only to his profession and his country, but to the human race and the world. At the same time, we claim as legitimately ours, all the benefit we may be able to derive from his example ; we claim as ours every inferencé in favour of the capabilities of our profession, and of the meliorating influence of its associations upon the intellectual and moral character, which may fairly be drawn from his great attainments and his blameless life.

Franklin enjoyed among his early contemporaries the highest reputation as a workman ; his skill and industry placed him in the foremost rank of practical printers. By the diligent and faithful exercise of our art, he attained a competence of this world's goods, and thus laid the foundation of his great subsequent usefulness. The daily and continued exercise of his profession, as a

means of subsistence, was made compatible by him with the attainment of great and varied knowledge, which fitted him for the highest stations in the gift of a grateful country. His purity of life, and fidelity in the discharge of every trust reposed in him; his unwearied activity, and the consecration of all his powers and acquirements for the good of his fellow-men; his moral and intellectual greatness, conceded by every civilized nation in the world, elevate him far above every other name in the annals of printing. In view of these facts, and in view of the inestimable value to the members of our profession of so high an example—an example which can never cease to act as an incentive to every virtuous impulse—we claim the age of Franklin as the golden age of our art. Not that printing, in his day, reached perfection, or that it received from him or his contemporaries any striking improvements; not that the practice of our profession was then more lucrative or respectable than it had previously been. Not for these reasons do we recur with pleasure and pride to the time when Franklin was one of our number—identified with us by one of the most intimate of social relations; not for this do we contemplate his life as forming an era in our art. Far other and higher reasons have influenced us to claim for it this pre-eminence. It is because his life was a living, practical, and ever-enduring demonstration, of the moral, intellectual, and social eminence that may be attained in our profession, by a faithful performance of its duties,

by a diligent improvement of its opportunities, by an unrepining submission to its privations. It is because he has proved to us what can be made of our lot in life; because he has shown that we have no occasion for unmanly regrets that we do not inherit the advantages of fortune or station,—no cause of complaint that our youth was not passed in academic bowers.

True it is—a truth we do well to remember—that we cannot all be Franklins. Though he was mainly indebted for his eminence to his persevering industry, his strong control of his passions, and his obedience to conscience, yet it cannot be denied that he was endowed by his Creator with rare gifts of intellect. These it was that fitted him to fill a peculiar place—to perform an allotted task specially his own. We are not all called to fill a like place, or to perform a similar task. Still, his example, on that account, is not the less valuable to us—not a whit the less available. We learn by it that a resolute and uncomplaining performance of duty, whatever our condition in life—the desire and the effort to be useful to our fellow-men, in the humblest as well as in the highest relations—is the infallible method of developing our highest capabilities—the only sure road to that peace and repose we all so earnestly seek. This was the lamp by which Franklin's feet were guided,—the compass by which his bark was faithfully steered. He did indeed obtain wealth and station—and these are things not to be despised; he received the approba-

tion and applause of the wise and the good—and these he by no means undervalued. But his happiness from this source can no more compare with the serene repose and joy that crowned his days, and supported him under every trial and vicissitude—arising from the consciousness that he had devoted all his powers to their best and highest use—than the transient flash of a meteor can compare with the steady light and warmth of the noonday sun.

Franklin's history, as written by himself—that inimitable piece of autobiography—is familiar to us all; and though no story of a life ever lost less of its interest by being repeated, yet a selection of incidents illustrative of his character, or suggestive of reflections which may be used for our own advantage, may be most appropriate to this occasion.

One of the striking points in the life of Franklin, is the very early and almost premature development of his character. The loftiness, and yet the soberness of his aspirations—the manliness, and yet the feasibility of the ends he proposed to himself, must strike every reader of his memoirs. Thus, shortly after entering upon his apprenticeship, which commenced at the early age of twelve years, we find him studying with interest, among other works of a grave character, *Xenophon's Memorabilia*; a *Treatise on Logic*, by the Society of Port Royal; and Locke's *Essay on the Conduct of the Human Understanding*—works generally supposed to be relished only by matured intellect and cultivated taste.

About this time he also devoted much of his leisure to the practice of English composition. He seems to have been fully aware, even at this early age, of the great advantage it is to every one, in every condition of life, to be able to express himself clearly, forcibly, and elegantly in his native tongue; and he spared no labour or pains to attain this accomplishment. His days and nights, as Dr. Johnson afterwards recommended, were therefore given to Addison and the Spectator. Barely to be able to make himself understood—to acquire that style of *easy* writing which is said to constitute the *hardest* reading—was not sufficient for Franklin. He had little faith in Dogberry's notion, that reading and writing come by nature, even to the fortunate tenant of a printing-office; and he did not cease from his efforts until he felt satisfied—and few will say he was deceived in this—that he had at least approximated the excellence of his model.

Franklin's early love of justice and liberty, and his hatred of intolerance and oppression, were worthy of both his New England and his Old England origin. He lived in an age when children and youth were treated by their parents and relatives with great harshness and severity. His elder brother, to whom he was apprenticed, seems to have been a man of irritable and violent temper; and more than once, for light and venial offences, he inflicted heavy blows upon the embryo philosopher. Though Franklin never after manifested resentment for this cruel treatment, but sought rather to

find excuses for it, it is evident that, at the time, it deeply wounded his feelings. It induced him to take what, under other circumstances, would have been an unjustifiable advantage of his brother,—and clandestinely to leave his home and friends, at the early age of seventeen, and throw himself, friendless and poor, upon the wide world of adventure.

No man ever made a better use than Franklin of the injuries done him. He permitted them to remain vivid in his mind, only that they might nerve his resolution never in his turn to inflict like injuries upon others.

Removed from paternal direction, he became exposed to all the temptations that beset the path of the inexperienced. His religious principles were shaken, and he fell into serious errors. He was made the dupe of a heartless imposition by Governor Keith, and was thrown upon the world of London, as friendless as when he first ate his roll in the streets of Philadelphia, and quenched his thirst in the Schuylkill. This was his hour of peril—the ordeal from which so few escape unscathed. A year and a half spent in England added something to his knowledge and experience, but contributed little to his morals or his purse. He returned to Philadelphia, and soon after went into business with a partner, in the twenty-second year of his age. It was then that he reflected seriously upon his principles and his conduct. He had been religiously educated by his parents, and the golden age of his childhood revived in his memory. He looked at his Deistical principles in the light of

experience;—he tested the tree by its fruit, and the result was, a conviction of its worthlessness. He saw that his friends the free-thinkers, who boasted their superiority to vulgar prejudice, were also found to be above moral obligations. “I grew convinced,” he says, “that *truth*, *sincerity*, and *integrity*, between man and man, were of the utmost importance to the felicity of life, and I formed resolutions to practise them ever while I lived.”

Franklin now began deliberately to shape his course for the future. All his actions were governed by fixed principles, and were made subservient to some important end. He had the sagacity to see, that whatever may be the object which men propose to themselves as the result of their labours, yet, really and substantially, all their happiness is derived from action—from the constant and vigorous exercise of some or all of their faculties. He saw that although the man in pursuit of wealth looks forward to a period when he hopes quietly to enjoy the fruit of his gains; and the ambitious man anticipates the time when he may repose upon his laurels, and regale himself with listening to the approbation and applause of the world, still, in neither case are their ends ever realized. An inexorable law of our nature has associated pleasure and delight only with activity. The habits formed for the attainment of an end become incompatible with the enjoyment of the long-sought object. The couch of luxury is transformed to a bed of thorns; and the garlands of ambition become

more withered and worthless than the fading leaves of autumn. Franklin's philosophical mind saw this at an early age, and he proposed to himself the noblest end to which human endeavour can be directed—a life of active benevolence and usefulness to his fellow-men. This principle, early cherished, to which all things were made subservient, grew with his growth, and became the delight of his life. If we lose sight of this his ruling motive, we fail to understand his character. He was industrious and frugal, and laboured hard to procure wealth; and he frankly acknowledged that he was not without ambition—that he valued the esteem of his fellow-men; these, however, were but means to a worthier end. Through life his actions testify, that his ambition and love of wealth were subordinate passions, which he was ever willing to sacrifice to his ruling desire to be useful to his friends, to his country, and to the world.

Injustice has been done to Franklin, both in England and our own country, by not distinguishing between the principal and the subordinate in his character. He has been represented as the impersonation of mere thrift, and the patron saint of worldly wisdom and prudence,—as a man whose teachings would sacrifice all generous emotion at the bidding of a low expediency and for personal advancement. No greater injustice can be done him than this. No man who has attained celebrity ever less deserved such a portrait.

Franklin knew well that independence in pecuniary

affairs, freedom from the thousand embarrassments of harassing penury, are not only essential to the comfort of life, but no mean guardians of independence of mind; he also knew that they are the first requisite, the indispensable condition, of every one who would effectually serve either his friends or his country. Having settled this in his own mind, he chose for himself the surest, most direct, and feasible means of attaining this condition. His example and precepts on the subject of economy—on the means of obtaining independence and comfort—are therefore the best the world affords.

But though Franklin was well aware that no structure can endure that is not built on a firm foundation,—though he insisted upon this as of the first and highest importance,—yet no one was ever less in danger of mistaking a mere foundation for the edifice itself. As a means to an end, he insisted upon pecuniary independence as a *sine quâ non*; but, as an end in itself, or as a means to mere personal and selfish gratification and aggrandizement, he looked upon it with all the contempt it deserved. Few men have ever succeeded so well as he, in practically assigning to the gifts of fortune their true importance and actual value.

As one among many instances that might be mentioned, to prove that Franklin had higher ends in view than wealth, we may refer to the fact of his having invented the stove that goes by his name,—so well known to our mothers and grandmothers;—which was so much used even in his own day, that several fortunes were

made by the manufacture and sale of it. Governor Thomas, of Pennsylvania, was so well pleased with it, that he offered to secure to the inventor a patent for the sole vending of it for a term of years ; “but I declined,” says Franklin, “from a principle which has ever weighed with me on such occasions ; namely, That, as we enjoy great advantages from the inventions of others, we should be glad of an opportunity to serve others by any invention of ours ; and this we should do freely and generously.”

Injustice has also been done to the religious character of Franklin ; for though it is true that he could not be classed with any denomination of Christians of his day ; and though it is also due to truth to declare our belief in a deeper and higher religious experience than he ever attained ; still, the devotional habits of his mature years, his belief in a future state of rewards and punishments, and his firm reliance on a particular Providence, exercising a constant and guardian watchfulness over the affairs of men, take him out of the ranks of any class of skeptics of either ancient or modern times. A favourite article of his creed, and one that lay at the spring of all his actions, was—“That the most acceptable service to God, is doing good to man.” These were his views so early as the twenty-seventh year of his age.

Franklin was probably the original founder of the many institutions existing among us for mutual improvement. He was one of the first to see the advantage of associated effort for mental and moral purposes. We are all familiar with the history of the “Junto,” instituted by

him in his twenty-third year, and which, forty years after its establishment, became the basis of the American Philosophical Society, of which he was the first president. It is probably to the wisdom and liberality of the rules which Franklin drew up for the government of the "Junto" that it owed its protracted existence. We may also add, that Franklin, in his turn, was doubtless mainly indebted to the "Junto"—to its discipline, and the practice it afforded him in the consideration and discussion of questions of the highest moment—for the practical wisdom and readiness which he afterwards brought to the public councils of his country. The debates of the club were under the direction of a president, and conducted in the sincere spirit of inquiry after truth, without fondness for dispute or desire of victory; and, to prevent warmth, all expressions of positiveness in opinion, or direct contradiction, were made contraband, and prohibited under pecuniary penalties. A revival and adoption of the rules of the "Junto," would have saved from shipwreck many of the associations that have been started in our midst for similar purposes. The uncommon good sense and liberality of the four questions put to a person about to be qualified as a member of this little society, must be our excuse for repeating them here:—

"1st. Have you any particular disrespect to any present members? *Answer.* I have not.

"2d. Do you sincerely declare that you love mankind in general, of what profession or religion soever? *Answer.* I do.

“3d. Do you think any person ought to be harmed in his body, name, or goods, for mere speculative opinions, or his external way of worship? *Answer.* No.

“4th. Do you love truth for truth’s sake, and will you endeavour impartially to find and receive it yourself, and communicate it to others? *Answer.* Yes.”

Franklin married, in his twenty-fifth year, a lady as much disposed, he says, to industry and frugality as himself. By her assistance and co-operation, and his own untiring industry; by the valuable aid which his character for integrity soon induced his friends to volunteer to him, and by avoiding every temptation to embark in speculations for becoming suddenly rich, he obtained a competence while yet in the flower of his age. At the same time, hand in hand with his daily labour to better his material condition—putting into type his own articles for his newspaper, and sharing in the severe toil of working it off on the old-fashioned press—he had been pursuing, constantly and systematically, a course of study which fitted him for a high sphere of usefulness.

It ought to be remembered to his honour, that Franklin never forgot the obligation which the assistance he had received from friends imposed upon him. He never neglected an opportunity to be useful to others in the same way in his turn. Many of the first printers in our country were started in business by Franklin; and his terms to them were always liberal, and his conduct kind and indulgent. Nor did he end here. At the close of his life he bequeathed in his will one thousand pounds sterling to the

city of Philadelphia, and a like sum to the city of Boston, to be loaned in sums of 60 pounds sterling, at a low rate of interest, to young married mechanics of good character. Nearly 500 persons have availed themselves of Franklin's generosity ; and the fund, greatly increased in amount, still exists for the benefit of mechanics.

Franklin never ceased to love the profession by which he had risen to eminence. He always retained a fondness for the conversation of printers, and was ever ready to enter into their schemes, and to aid and suggest improvements in their art. Even while he associated with statesmen and courtiers, and had stood in the presence of kings, the same habits continued. So far was he from being reserved on the subject of his early condition and pursuits, that he often alluded to them, as giving value to his experience, and as furnishing incidents illustrative of his maxims of life.

Franklin was indebted for his first important success in life, and for his introduction to public notice, to his superior workmanship as a printer, and his ability to write with clearness, precision, and energy. His newspaper, "*The Pennsylvania Gazette*," excelled in neatness and accuracy anything of the kind that had been seen before in the colonies, and the elegant contributions of his pen made it eagerly sought for. His rival, Bradford, who was printer to the Legislature, had struck off an Address of the House to the Governor in so blundering a manner, that Franklin was induced to reprint it neatly and correctly. He then

sent a copy to every member. The next year he was voted printer to the Legislature. From this time he gradually rose in public favour. He declares that he never sought for office, and never declined to serve in any capacity where he could be useful. But his private virtue and integrity, his modesty, intelligence, and ability, were so conspicuous, that his fellow-citizens were always desirous to secure his services.

From being printer to the Assembly, Franklin rose to the office of its Clerk. He was afterwards appointed Postmaster of Philadelphia, the duties of which trust he performed to general satisfaction; and at length his fellow-citizens chose him to represent them in the Legislature. This office afforded him an appropriate and conspicuous field for the exercise of his great and brilliant talents. From this period, which was twenty-six years before our Declaration of Independence, Franklin probably contributed more, by his wise and prudent counsels, and his public acts and writings, to prepare the people for that great event, than any other public man in our country.

Time will not permit us to detail the many great and important measures originated by Franklin during his legislative career. We must not, however, omit to mention, that as, during the period when he was employed in his profession, performing manual labour, he found opportunity to acquire the knowledge that afterwards gave him eminence as a statesman; so also, while faithfully serving the state in many capacities,

his unremitting industry gave him leisure for pursuits and original experiments which raised him to the first rank among scientific men and philosophers. In his 48th year the degree of Master of Arts was, of their own motion, conferred on him by the two highest Colleges in our country, Harvard and Yale; and he was shortly after, without solicitation on his part, elected a member of the Royal Society of London. A few years later, the degree of Doctor of Laws was conferred upon him by the University of St. Andrews, in Scotland; and he was subsequently elected a member of nearly all the principal scientific and literary societies of Europe and America.

In 1753 he was appointed Postmaster-General for the American Colonies, and in this capacity he was deputed by the Pennsylvania Assembly to wait upon General Braddock, who had been sent over from England with two regiments, to put an end to the old French war. Franklin suggested to him some important cautions, which, had they been heeded, might have saved that ill-fated commander from rushing upon his ruin; but his blind confidence in the invincibility of the King's regular and disciplined troops, led him to disdain advice which, he acknowledged, might have been wholesome for raw American militia. Notwithstanding Braddock's headstrong obstinacy, Franklin pledged his own private credit—the people refusing to trust the commander of the King's regular troops—to procure horses and wagons for the expedition; and he very narrowly

escaped being ruined in his fortune to redeem his pledge.

The French war being ended, a controversy which had long been carried on between the Pennsylvania Assembly and the Proprietaries of the colony—who claimed exemption from taxation of their immense estates, even for the defence of the country—was again revived. Franklin had always taken the side of the Assembly and the people in this controversy; and he was now deputed agent of the Assembly to the British Court, to petition the King for a redress of grievances. His reputation as a scholar had preceded his arrival in England. During the five years he remained in that country, his company was sought after by the first scientific men and philosophers of the age. By his perfect knowledge of American affairs, and the clear light in which he unfolded it; by the urbanity of his deportment and sincerity of his conduct, he made a deep impression on the Administration then in power, and was often consulted by them on the general business of the colonies. He also succeeded in obtaining the end of his mission; and even the Proprietaries of Pennsylvania, whose interests were strongly opposed to the views he had come to advocate, were compelled to acquit him of any conduct which they could censure. Franklin's sterling honesty, his superiority to all intrigue, and reliance upon the justice of the cause he had espoused, secured to him constant composure and self-possession, and enabled him at the same time to read, to evade,

and to pity the arts and subterfuges of his opponents.

We here see how deep and strong, by his knowledge and experience in public affairs, were thus early laid the foundations of his ability to serve his country in the great contest that was to ensue. He returned to America in 1762. His stay in his native land, however, was of short duration. The controversy between the Assembly and the Proprietaries still continued. The people now petitioned for a radical change of government, which should abrogate the authority of the Proprietaries, and substitute a royal government in its stead. The Assembly sustained the prayer of the petitioners, and Franklin, who had always been a favourite in that body, was now elevated to the office of its Speaker. His adversaries, however, succeeded in defeating his election by the people for the subsequent session, and the Assembly appointed him as a special agent to proceed again to the court of Great Britain. In addition to his commission to take charge of the petition for a change of government, he was also specially instructed to remonstrate against the passage of the famous Stamp-Act, which had just then been proposed, as well as to manage the general affairs of the province of Pennsylvania.

Franklin arrived again in England in 1764. His duties now devolved upon him the conduct of affairs of the gravest moment. The difficulties between England and America had assumed a serious aspect. The passage of the Stamp-Act aroused the most determined opposition

in all the colonies ; and Franklin was considered the fittest person to remonstrate against it, and urge its immediate repeal. In addition to his duties in behalf of Pennsylvania, he was also solicited to act as agent for Massachusetts, New Jersey, and Georgia, in relation to the Stamp-Act.

It was at this time that Dr. Franklin was called before Parliament, to be examined respecting the state of affairs in America. His answers were wholly unpremeditated, no previous notice having been given him of the tenor of the questions intended to be put to him ; but his noble bearing on that occasion, the fearlessness with which he defended the conduct of his countrymen, and censured the measures of the Parliament, left a deep impression upon that assembly of great statesmen, and inspired universal respect for his character, as well as for the cause he had so warmly espoused.

Franklin remained eleven years in England, making occasional journeys to France and other countries of the Continent, where he was received with the highest marks of respect and esteem. During all this time he was unremitting in his efforts for the welfare of his country. He exerted his utmost ability, and in many instances with signal success, to procure the repeal of measures oppressive to the colonies. He spared no pains to conciliate and reconcile the two countries ; and when at length he saw that a collision was inevitable, he was intimidated by no danger he might incur from urging the colonists to prepare themselves for the contest. The English minis-

try, knowing the high place he held in the love and esteem of his countrymen, were deeply anxious to gain him to their interests ; and accordingly they left no means untried to compass their end. Flattery and promises of promotion, threats and intimidation, were in vain exhausted for this purpose. Franklin remained true to the cause of his country, not less from conviction of its justice, than from predilection for the home and the friends of his youth.

His firmness procured his dismissal from his place at the head of the American Post-Office ; and it was also hinted to him by the high officers of state, that it was best for the colonies to come to an understanding with England, since their seaport towns might so easily be laid in ashes. “ I replied,” says Franklin, “ that the chief part of my little property consisted of houses in those towns, and that they might make bonfires of them whenever they pleased ; that the fear of losing them would never alter my resolution to resist to the last the claims of Parliament.”

Franklin remained long enough in England to present the Petition of the first Continental Congress to the King, which was laid before Parliament, and speedily rejected with evident marks of contempt. He returned to Philadelphia in 1775, and, the day after his arrival, was chosen by the Assembly of Pennsylvania a delegate to the second Continental Congress.

Franklin was now no longer young. Seventy winters had shed their snows upon his venerable head : toil, and

hardship, and sorrow had done their work, and the infirmities of age were upon him. Death had severed the strong attachments of his early years. The wife of his youth slept in her peaceful grave, and his only and cherished son had at once cruelly turned his back upon his father and his country. At such a crisis, when the vigorous blood of mature manhood no longer flowed in his veins—when his knowledge, gained by long experience, of the uncertainty of human affairs—the promptings of nature, soliciting safety and repose—and all the prudential suggestions that accompany declining years, would so naturally counsel and justify caution, hesitancy, and reserve; at such a moment, Franklin was summoned to embark with his countrymen upon the wreck-strowed ocean of revolution;—called to risk the humble fortune he had acquired by honest industry, so needed to provide for his growing infirmities,—to expose to the jeers of the scoffer his good name, and the reputation for wisdom and foresight he so deservedly enjoyed throughout Europe,—to place even the little remnant of life remaining to him in imminent peril of the ignominious death of the scaffold.

None of these things moved him. For weal and woe, for life and death, he had consecrated himself to the cause of truth, and justice, and his country, and he asked only how he could do most service in its behalf. In the spring of 1776 he was appointed by Congress a Commissioner to proceed to Canada, to assist the Canadians in forming a provisional government, and to regu-

late the operations of the army. Though his mission produced little or no effect, and his health was greatly impaired by the hardships of his journey;—though he had the mortification to see the American army retreating from Quebec, pursued by a well-disciplined enemy, superior in numbers and amply supplied, yet his zeal and devotion to the cause of freedom never for a moment abated. Immediately after his return he resumed his seat in Congress, and engaged in its business with unabated activity and cheerfulness.

In that body of illustrious men, which the Earl of Chatham pronounced the most honourable assembly of statesmen since those of the ancient Greeks and Romans in the most virtuous times, no one was more conspicuous for the wisdom and maturity of his views, or for the decision and boldness of the steps he counselled, than Franklin. His colleagues honoured him with the highest mark of their confidence, by placing him on the memorable committee of five that was chosen to draft the Declaration of Independence.

There is something in the popular estimate of Franklin's character, that is avers to associate his name with the stirring scenes of '76, and particularly with the first conception of that wonderful instrument that thrilled the nations like the sudden blast of a trumpet, and secured at once and for ever the independence of our country. It is because in every character approaching perfection, as in every perfect work of art, so little is revealed to a superficial glance, and so much remains

unseen, to surprise and delight the attentive observer and student, that Franklin's mind, in common with that of many men of the highest endowments, has been liable to be underrated, at least, if not greatly undervalued. But the daring boldness and decision of Franklin, in a cause which his reason fully approved, is a trait in his character which no one acquainted with his whole history would venture to dispute. In ardour, firmness, and courage, in his own appropriate sphere, he was excelled by no one of the great men of the Revolution. No one of them gave a more decided support to the Declaration of Independence. Let who would falter or waver, never a doubt existed as to the course Franklin would take, when the instrument that perilled all earthly hopes for the cause of freedom was presented for his signature. A life-long training had fitted him for that hour. Beneath the placid and modest exterior of the philosopher and sage there swelled as brave and heroic a heart as ever beat in a human bosom; and he asked no higher boon, no worthier climax to his long and useful life in the cause of humanity, than permission to enroll his name with that band of immortals "that priesthood of liberty, who stood up unmoved, undismayed, while the ark of their salvation thundered round and shook, and lightened in their faces, putting all of them their venerable hands upon it, nevertheless."*

Four months had scarcely elapsed after the Declaration of Independence, when Franklin was again called

* Edinburgh Review.

to take charge of the interests of his country in a foreign land. The Continental Congress were solicitous to secure the good-will of France in the struggle upon which they had entered, and also, if possible, to obtain the favour of loans in money, or the munitions of war. The high esteem in which Franklin was held by the most cultivated minds in France, could not fail to designate him as the fittest person in America to be intrusted with this weighty commission. He held himself in readiness, as he had ever done, to obey the behest of his country. Previous to embarking, however, he gave the highest evidence of his devotedness to the cause of that country, and of his confidence in the result of her perilous struggle, by raising all the money he could command—being between three and four thousand pounds sterling—and placing it as a loan at the disposal of Congress.

After a boisterous passage, during which the vessel in which he sailed, being chased by British cruisers, was kept constantly prepared for action, Franklin arrived in France. The noble French people, ever ready to do honour to distinguished visitors, received him with an enthusiasm seldom manifested even towards princes and nobles. In their eyes, Franklin had won for himself a nobility in whose splendour that of ancestry grew pale. "Men imagined," says a contemporary French historian, "that they saw in his visage of antiquity, come back to give austere lessons and generous examples to the moderns. They personified in him the Republic, of

which he was the representative and the legislator. They regarded his virtues as those of his countrymen, and even judged of their physiognomy by the imposing and serene traits of his own. Happy was he who could gain admittance to see him in the house which he occupied at Passy. This venerable old man, it was said, joined to the demeanour of Phocion the spirit of Socrates. Courtiers were struck with his dignity, and discovered in him the profound statesman."

How valuable to his country in her hour of extremity was then the fame of her illustrious son! And Franklin generously devoted his fame, as he had before his life and fortune, to the service of his country. Again and again did he consent to become as it were a suppliant for her at the French Court, even at the risk of wearying the cabinet by his importunity. The important aid which Franklin obtained for the colonies in Europe, at this critical period of their history, can hardly be overrated. There can be little doubt that the veneration in which he was held in France had great weight in inducing the Marquis de Lafayette, that dearest foster-son of our country, to leave the land of his birth, and the society of his young and beautiful wife, and the brilliant career which his great wealth and family connexions opened to him, to share the fortunes of a handful of brave men in a distant wilderness, proscribed as rebels and outlaws by the most powerful government on earth.

The appearance of so eminent an advocate for

America at the Court of Versailles, and the prospect of an offensive and defensive league between her colonies and her most ancient and inveterate foe, was the cause of no little uneasiness to England, and excited against Franklin the jealousy and hatred of her ministers. They accordingly set in motion all the well-known machinery of diplomacy, to destroy his influence, and induce him to abandon his mission.—Flattery, promises, and threats were again resorted to. Agents were specially deputed, kindly to inform him that he was surrounded by French ministerial spies. When at length it was hinted that even his life was in danger, Franklin thanked his informant for his kind caution, “but,” added he, “having nearly finished a long life, I set but little value upon what remains of it. Like a draper, when one chaffers with him for a remnant, I am ready to say, ‘As it is only a fag-end, I will not differ with you about it; take it for what you please.’ Perhaps the best use such an old fellow can be put to is to make a martyr of him.”

Franklin remained nine years in France, in the almost constant performance of arduous and valuable services for his country. At length her independence, of which he had assisted by the foundation, was crowned and consummated by its full recognition in a Treaty of Peace with England, the negotiations for which at Paris he had been the principal agent in conducting. He had now unexpectedly survived the accomplishment of a great work. He had assisted at

the first and last acts of that memorable drama which constitutes an epoch even in world-history. When his beloved country first summoned her brave ones to the onset,—when insulted Liberty

“Peal’d her loud drum, and twang’d her trumpet horn,”

he was foremost among the first to rally to her standard, and to peril fortune and fame, ease and preferment, and even life itself in her sacred cause. And now that a benignant Heaven had signally smiled upon trusting hope and earnest endeavour; now that in his aged hands had been placed the olive-branch of peace to be borne to his natal soil, well might he exclaim, in fulness of heart, with the aged Simeon—“Now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace !”

Franklin was now in his eightieth year. A painful disease had fastened upon him; and his earnest desire to spend the remainder of his days in his native land, induced him to solicit his recall. The Congress granted his request. On the occasion of taking his leave of them, no mark of attention or respect was omitted on the part of his ardent and numerous friends in France. His departure was anticipated with regret by them all. His bodily infirmities not permitting the motion of a carriage, he was conveyed to the embarkment of Havre de Grace in the Queen’s litter, which had been kindly offered him for his journey. His leisure was during this his last sea-voyage was occupied in writing valuable papers on scientific subjects, which were afterwards read before the Ameri-

can Philosophical Society, and published in a volume of the Society's Transactions.

He arrived in Philadelphia in 1785. Although he had considered his public life at an end on leaving France, and anticipated that he was henceforward to enjoy, in the midst of his friends, complete repose from his labours, yet in this he was disappointed. Notwithstanding his age and infirmities, so high was the value set upon his service, that he was chosen President of Pennsylvania (an office corresponding to that of Governor in the other States) for three successive years after his return home; and was only then released from service by constitutional ineligibility.

He was also chosen a delegate from Pennsylvania to the Convention for forming the Constitution of the United States. Though then in his eighty-second year, he attended faithfully to the duties of the Convention. The published record of speeches he then made shows no abatement in his benevolence, his patriotism, or his intellectual vigour.

Franklin continued in public life till within a year and a half of his death. This time, though often consulted on public affairs, he never again held office. His painful disease now left him but few moments of repose. For the last twelve months of his life he was chiefly confined to his bed, his cheerfulness and serenity never deserted him, his readiness and disposition to do good awoke at every interval of his pains. Only twenty-four days before his decease, he finished a



paper in behalf of humanity, which, for happy conception and sound reasoning, is said to be not inferior to any of his writings. No repining or peevish expression ever escaped him. Calmly, and with ineffable peace, on the 17th of April, 1790, in the eighty-fifth year of his age, his sun sunk to the horizon, to rise again in a purer sphere, in the vigour and beauty of eternal youth.

We have thus essayed to trace a few of the leading incidents in the life of Franklin. Do we not well to honour his memory? Ought we ever to let slip an occasion like this to refresh our minds with a recollection of his great and noble virtues? His was indeed a character of rare excellence—a union of great qualities seldom found existing together in the same individual. He united in himself the two great principles of wise conservatism and enlightened progress. He was free alike from a blind worship of time-honoured error, and a superficial contempt for those monuments of wisdom and experience that have survived the storm and wreck of centuries of desolation. While he maintained the position of a bold experimenter—of a man who feared not to question, by a rigorous logic, even the opinions that had been held almost too sacred for human scrutiny—yet no one ever stood in less danger of being hurried away by the mere current of innovation. All other opinions might admit of change, modification, or re-combination; but the great principles of Truth, Justice, and Integrity could never yield in his mind to further the success of any cause, however bene-

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