



BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

A QUAKER AT THE FRENCH COURT

EVEN AS A YOUNG COUNTRY, JUST BEGINNING to be settled, America came to be known as a land of opportunity. Thousands of men have since shown the energy and intelligence to find what opportunity America has held for them, but none has become more famous than the young man who was walking along a road bordering the river bank, a few miles west of Burlington, New Jersey, one afternoon in 1723. A farm cart pulled up beside him. A farmer was driving. Stopping his cart, he hailed the young man. . . .

FARMER: Whoa, Nell. . . . Hi, there! Want a ride?

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN: Most certainly, sir! If you can take a passenger.

FARMER: Put your foot in the wheel and swing up. . . . That's the way. Giddap, Nell! Ye're active for a city lad.

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN: How did you know I was from the city?

FARMER: Tell it by your talk. Couldn't tell it by your looks, for sartain. Ye're fair covered up with New Jersey dust.

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN: I know that, sir. It seems either to rain all the time in this colony, or else to be very dusty.

FARMER: Ain't no different from other colonies. Where be ye from?

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN: Boston. My name, sir, is Benjamin Franklin.

FARMER: Ben Franklin, huh? Ye've got a grown up manner on you for a lad. You don't look to be no more than sixteen.

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN: Seventeen!

FARMER: Lookin' for work?

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN: Yes. But not in New Jersey. In Philadelphia. I know of a position to be had there in a printing shop—if only I can get there soon enough.

FARMER: Ye're *walkin'* to Philadelphia? Lad, ye

can't get there in them shoes! Another mile and you'll be barefoot.

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN: I'll get there, never fear. I've gone too far to turn back. Like Caesar, I have burned my bridges behind me.

FARMER: Like who? Lad, ye haven't been burnin' bridges in New Jersey!

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN: Nay, sir. I mean I can't stop—with opportunity but forty miles away.

FARMER: If ye call lookin' for work in a big city an opportunity, I pity you, boy.

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN: I must take my chances on it. It was time for me to leave my brother's print shop and strike out for myself. And I have found that for every mischance—nay, not for *every* one—but perhaps for every five—there comes something fortunate. But when it comes, ye shouldn't miss it. Opportunity knocks but once.

FARMER: And how much money have ye, if it ain't easy to find work?

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN: Wait until I see. . . . Ah! There's my treasury.

FARMER: A Spanish dollar and a copper shilling! My conscience, lad . . .

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN: Look, sir! Look back of us, to the curve of the river! A boat rows up very fast.

FARMER: Aye. Most likely farm folks rowin' to the market in Philadelph'y!

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN: Wait! Hold your horse! Let me down!

FARMER: Why, lad? It's a private boat. The regular boat ain't till Saturday.

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN: I can jump down.

FARMER: Whoa, Nell!

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN: Don't ye see? The boat is steering unevenly. There's one . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . ten oars on the port side and one . . . two . . . nine on the starboard! They must have an extra oar aboard and they need someone to use it. Ahoy, there! . . . Ahoy! . . . Rest oars!

BOATMAN: (*shouting from boat*) What do you want?

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN: Where does your boat go?

BOATMAN: Philadelphia!

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN: If you need another oar, I'll row.

BOATMAN: We'll pull in to shore.

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN: (*to farmer*) Goodbye, sir. Thank you for the ride in your cart. If I were a believer in omens, I should say that my sighting this boat was a good one.

FARMER: It is, for sartain.

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN: Thank you again for your help, sir. And goodbye, sir!

FARMER: Good luck to you, son. Ye're a right smart lad!

BOATMAN: Hurry, boy! Step in! I'll take your bundle aboard first. Step careful, boy.

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN: I'm aboard.

BOATMAN: Give him his oar. All right! Pull away . . . all! One . . . two . . . three . . . four . . .

So Benjamin Franklin as a young man arrived in Philadelphia with one Spanish dollar and a shilling. In twenty years he added to that slim store his own printing shop and book shop, his own newspaper and the famous "Poor Richard's Almanac." For Philadelphia, the city that made him prosperous, he initiated projects that gave her a city police force, paved and lighted streets, a circulating library, the American Philosophical Society, a hospital, and a school that later became the University of Pennsylvania. But, as a middle aged man, Franklin was still mindful of new opportunities. One evening in 1748, at the Franklin home, Mr. Franklin sat talking in his electrical laboratory, with Mr. David Hall. . . .

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN: If it please you, Mr. Hall, we will sign the papers tomorrow, and you may henceforth call my business half your own.

DAVID HALL: I shall be delighted, Mr. Franklin. But now that this bargain is struck, will you satisfy my curiosity by telling me why you have done it?

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN: Why I mean to let you run my printing shop and newspaper?

DAVID HALL: Aye. Perhaps you will give all your time to politics.

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN: Nay. I have found politics as fretful as business. There is no mystery, sir, though the neighbors persist in thinking so. My secret lies here about us—in these bottles and wires and liquids. I have fallen in love with science.

DAVID HALL: (*doubtfully*) Hum!

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN: Let me show you my electrical bottle and its monstrous sparks.

DAVID HALL: If—if you insist, sir . . .

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN: There is none like it in America! (*calling*) Debbie! . . . Debbie! . . .

DEBBIE: (*approaching*) What is it, Benjamin? Good evening, Mr. Hall.

DAVID HALL: Good evening, Mrs. Franklin.

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN: Debbie, will you help me move these jars to the table where the bottle lies?

DEBBIE: Another experiment! This goes on all day, Mr. Hall. We have as many electrical shocks to offer in this house as the wizards at a country fair.

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN: (*laughing*) I hope I am more scientific than a strolling magician, Debbie.

DEBBIE FRANKLIN: And have ye ever heard anything more odd, Mr. Hall, than my husband's retiring from business?

DAVID HALL: In truth, retirement and Benjamin Franklin do not seem words that fit together. Philadelphia is much puzzled.

DEBBIE FRANKLIN: The neighbors gossip and say that Mr. Franklin does not seem a man to sleep in a corner all day.

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN: I am thankful for my standing with the neighbors. Have I seemed any sleepier of late?

DAVID HALL: To speak the truth, sir, you have seemed more alert, more happy, than I can remember since I've known you.

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN: Ah, that was because you did not know me when I was young. Then it seemed to me always that there was a broad road stretching before me that I had only to follow, to find good fortune. Lately I have had that same pleasant sense, and today—today I wrote to Peter Collinson in London and told him of my findings.

DAVID HALL: And what of interest have ye found, sir?

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN: The repulsions and attractions of pointed bodies for electricity, of positive and negative charging, and of my belief that *lightning* is naught but electricity.

DEBBIE FRANKLIN: Lightning, Ben! Lightning is fire from the stars!

DAVID HALL: Whatever it is, I'm content to remain with the printing business.

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN: I shall have no regrets, I am certain. . . .

Franklin gave up his business life and grasped what he sensed was, for him, a larger opportunity. And it was his fame as a scientist that first made him known all over his own country and in Europe as well—as the inventor of the lightning rod, and as the discoverer of much sound data on electricity. He soon had a standing in Europe that made him a logical ambassador from the Colonies when they found themselves facing perilous times. In the year 1778, in Paris, the American delegation, sent to France to enlist help in the struggle for Independence, was about to be presented at Court. In a room set aside for them, Franklin, his colleagues, and the court barber were having an anxious consultation.

LEE: Mr. Franklin, this is a tragedy! On the day of all days when we are to seek the aid of the French court!

BARBER: Monsieur Franklin . . . the wig will not fit you! I try it this way. . . . I try it that way. . . .

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN: Since there's no help for it, gentlemen, and my wig will not fit me, we may better look for a way to mend matters than to grieve o'er them.

LEE: I believe you scarcely see the gravity of our plight, sir. Izard, Deane and I are dressed in court costume. But you—you are the chief American delegate to Louis the Sixteenth and you are wearing that

plain brown suit! Now this business of the wig will make us out savages and bumkins! Perhaps the court may even think it a deliberate affront!

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN: I do not pretend the matter is trivial, Mr. Lee. "For want of a shoe, the horse was lost, for want of a horse, the rider was lost." . . . Would it not be better if, instead of wearing a ridiculous wig, I went without one entirely?

LEE: You can't, sir!

IZARD: Impossible!

LEE: You dare not challenge French tradition, Mr. Franklin.

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN: I should not challenge French tradition. I should merely assert the existence of an American tradition for going without wigs.

BARBER: Mon Dieu! What a problem! I am the court barber! It will all fall on me! I will be the man who ruined the friendship of nations! My customers will leave me!

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN: Oh, not necessarily, sir. Once, many years ago, I entered Philadelphia most informally, with my pockets stuffed with soiled linen, and munching a roll as I walked. A lady noticed my appearance and laughed. Yet she later married me.

LEE: I would remind you, sir, that Marie Antoinette's standards in dress are not those of Philadelphia.

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN: No. But dwelling on that

trivial matter has given me time for my decision. I shall go as I am, gentlemen. I shall wear this plain brown suit and my own hair.

BARBER: The brow is noble and the long locks stately. . . .

LEE: I know you better, sir, than to try to dissuade you. Though I remind you again that you are an Ambassador from America.

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN: Aye. . . . Now I have be-thought me of another unsuitable item of dress . . . this sword. . . .

IZARD: (*aghast*) You will go like a plain gentleman—swordless?

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN: A plain and *democratic* gentleman. If the carriage waits, let us leave for Versailles.

A short time later, at Versailles, a huge crowd packed the shady alleys and the courtyards, and pressed near the wide stairways. As Benjamin Franklin and his four delegates walked into the palace, a drum corps stood at attention. Drums rolled, the palace flag was dipped, and long files of troops presented arms. Trumpets sounded. The doors to the King's apartment swung open. The Major of the Swiss Guards called to the waiting courtiers. . . .

MAJOR: Les Ambassadeurs des treize Etats Unis!

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN: Your Majesty!

LOUIS THE SIXTEENTH: Welcome to Versailles, Monsieur Franklin!

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN: I present my credentials and my embassy from the United States of America.

LOUIS THE SIXTEENTH: I pray you make it known to your people that I have been most satisfied with your conduct during your sojourn in my realm. Please assure your Congress of my friendship.

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN: I thank you, sire. My countrymen will rejoice greatly in this news—that our new nation has been recognized in Europe.

Franklin was then conducted to Her Majesty the Queen amid the sounds of trumpets and the excited voices of the bystanders. Franklin's simple Quaker dress was a sensation. He had won the Court! He soon became the idol of France and the skillful builder of his country's diplomatic fortunes. As a young man, in his middle age, and as an old man, tired by his strenuous life, he was never too busy to grasp an opportunity.