Franklin's Elegy
FRANKLIN'S ELEGY

Through the kindness of thirty-two Friends the University Library has acquired what is believed to be the earliest extant manuscript of Benjamin Franklin, one of his earliest efforts in literary composition. This unique treasure is entitled “Elegy on My Sister Franklin.” It is written on four pages of a sheet of note-paper, and is initialed “B.F.” By a previous owner it has been handsomely bound in full red morocco, with gilt border-line. Well may we consider the acquisition of this interesting item of Frankliniana one of the most important events in the recent history of the Library.

The manuscript is not dated, nor do we know the name of the sister-in-law in whose memory it was written. As Dr. Pepper remarked in making the public presentation of the poem to the Library, this offers an attractive problem for investigation, though it is likely to be difficult to solve. From data given in the New England Historical and Genealogical Register it would seem that “my sister Franklin” may have been Elizabeth Tyng, wife of his brother Samuel; ———-Gooch, wife of his brother John; or the wife of his brother Peter. Pending further investigation we shall welcome any information which any of our readers may be able to contribute on this point.

Unless the name of the sister-in-law and the date of her death can be established we cannot know positively when the elegy was written, but it was probably between 1718 and 1722, when Franklin was between 12 and 16 years old; most probably, we think, it was nearer the earlier date than the later. This is not surprising when one remembers the “Dogood Papers,” written when he was 16, and his account of literary aspirations which he entertained at a still earlier period. When he was but 12 years old he was apprenticed to his brother James, who had set up his printing press in Boston. “I now had access to better books,” he says in the Autobiography. “An acquaintance with the apprentices of book-sellers enabled me sometimes to borrow a small one . . . . I now took a fancy to poetry, and made some little pieces; my brother, thinking it might turn to account, encouraged me and put me on composing occasional ballads. One was called The Lighthouse Tragedy, and contained an account of the drowning of Captain Worthilake, with his two daughters; the
Elegy on my Sister Franklin.

Warm from my breast, swrought'st with Grief & Hope
These melancholy streams, spontaneous flow.
Now for a favorite sister, sad Disease
Now, in the stormiest of the female Race,
In grief, she's gone (ah me), O my Friend,
Your heart-felt Sorrows for a Sister suspend
And sympathize with me whilst I lament
Our Friend's decay, and give my Passions vent.
O what a loss have all her Friends record
A present loss, which must be retrieved
We've lost a Sister, Daughter, Sister kind
In whom each Virtue Grace and Worth combine.
May Heaven enable us to meet,
With the Composure this Affliction great.
Since Heaven's Commands that passed we resign
Our Will and Pleasure to the Will divine.
Yet, while of reason: Nature will rebel
Grateful Sighs and filial Tears impel.
And sighs and tears the afflicted Bacon cast.
For lo, with Balsam, winding Wounds appear
My much-loved Sister, who afflicted sore.
With Christian Patience her Affliction bore.
And yet awaited Heaven's own Time to break her vein.
And reach her native Home (the empyreal Place)
My dear my much-loved Sister! — O my Friend.

In this World on nothing may we rest.
Our restless selves possess
Of every needful Thing to make us bliss.
Some Friend! Demitio (like her we now lament)
Casual Mischance, or tragical Event.
Like an intruding Guest will intervene
To frustrate our Hopes and mar our blissful Scene.

How weak! how vain! how void all mundane Joys,
A Midday fraught with Nonsense, Sham and Noise.
A whatsy life which we so highly esteem.
A Bubble, Vapour, Shadow, fleeting Dream.
From sordid Dust we sprang & surely must
Or soon or late return to native Dust.
What mortal Man even in his best Estate
All Vanity, Pride, Folly and Deceit

Thus from Joy to sorrow & from Bliss to Woe
So sudden the Transition here below!
Which sent by Heaven, transfigured her tender Heart,
The best of Friends, my best of Friends, most part
I alas how hard to lose a Friend, henceforward
A human Nature will be absent here
How vain the Pomp and Pageantry of War
Those Tears most grateful which from Friendship flow.
Better one silent Tear, than heart-felt sigh
Than Hutsheons, Tombs and Epitaphs which lie.
And tho' I humbly trust our Friend deceased
Is wafted to the Sain][ eternal Rest,
Yet her sad Exit made my Resolves
In most profound Ablution pour involving
With Sighs and Groans, my laboring Breast swells
And when my cheeks (blessed) wondrously weep
May Heaven forgive one of I ought offend
While thus I mourn my dear departed Friend
Sure Heaven forbids that for our Friends to mourn
Nor to bedew with Tears their peaceful urn
Since Tears assuage our Griefs, "t's both our Woe.
And our Affliction and Affection show,
If in this Life alone we observe progress
We work of all most wretched and distrest.
B.F.
other was a sailor's song, on the taking of Teach (or Black-beard) the pirate. They were wretched stuff, in the Grub-street-ballad style; and when they were printed he sent me about the town to sell them. The first sold wonderfully, the event being recent, having made a great noise. This flattered my vanity; but my father discouraged me by ridiculing my performances, and telling me verse-makers were generally beggars. So I escaped being a poet, most probably a very bad one."

The "Dogood Papers" were printed in the New England Courant in 1722. Number VII, in June, contained the famous "Receipt" for making an elegy, reading as follows:

"A RECEIPT to make a New-England Funeral ELEGY."

"For the Title of your Elegy. Of these you may have enough ready made to your Hands; but if you should chuse to make it your self, you must be sure not to omit the words Aetatis Suae, which will Beautify it exceedingly.

"For the Subject of your Elegy. Take one of your Neighbours who has lately departed this Life; it is no great matter at what Age the Party dy'd, but it will be best if he went away suddenly, being Kill'd, Drown'd, or Frose to Death.

"Having chose the Person, take all his Virtues, Excellemcies, &c. and if he have not enough, you may borrow some to make up a sufficient Quantity: To these add his last Words, dying Expressions, &c. if they are to be had; mix all these together, and be sure you strain them well. Then season all with a Handful or two of Melancholly Expressions, such as, Dreadful, Deadly, cruel cold Death, unhappy Fate, weeping Eyes, &c. Have mixed all these Ingredients well, put them into the empty Scull of some young Harvard; (but in Case you have ne'er a One at Hand, you may use your own,) there let them Ferment for the Space of a Fortnight, and by that Time they will be incorporated into a Body, which take out, and having prepared a sufficient Quantity of double Rhimes, such as Power, Flower; Quiver, Shiver; Grieve us, Leave us; tell you, excel you; Expeditions, Physicians; Fatigue him, Intrigue him; &c. you must spread all upon Paper, and if you can procure a Scrap of Latin to put at the End, it will garnish it mightily; then having affixed your Name at the Bottom, with a Moestus Composuit, you will have an Excellent Elegy."
N.B. This Receipt will serve when a Female is the Subject of your Elegy, provided you borrow a greater Quantity of Virtues, Excellencies, &c.

"SIR,
"Your Servant,
"SILENCE DOGOOD."

One can hardly read this "Receipt" and think that Franklin's own elegiac effort was of later date. If we assume that it was written about the same time, this would involve the highly improbable hypothesis that it was designed as a facetious illustration of the "Receipt." There can be little doubt, we think, that the "Elegy on My Sister Franklin" was written in 1718 or shortly after, in the period when the ambitious young printer's apprentice, with vanity flattered by the success of "The Lighthouse Tragedy" and other ballads, had not yet perceived the probability of his becoming but "a very bad poet." The "Receipt" written at 16 can be best understood as a satire directed not so much at the effusions of other writers as at his own effort, of which, at the still less mature age of 12, he had been proud.

The list of contributors to the purchase of this manuscript is as follows:

Dr. J. H. Austin
Dr. Detlev W. Bronk
Dr. Charles W. Burr
Mr. Thomas F. Cadwalader
Dr. G. M. Coates
Dr. George E. deSchweinitz
Mr. Russell Duane
Mr. A. Felix duPont
Dr. Thomas Fitz-Hugh, Jr.
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Dr. Karl M. Houser
Mr. Samuel F. Houston
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Dr. Alexander Randall
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Dr. Alfred Stengel
Mr. C. F. C. Stout
Dr. W. D. Tracy
Dr. Gabriel Tucker
Mr. Charlton Yarnall
Mr. John E. Zimmerman

To all of these we are deeply grateful; and acknowledgment is particularly due to Dr. Krumbhaar, who first undertook to collect the money needed for its purchase; to Dr. Ravdin, who aided greatly in achieving the goal; and to Dr.
Rosenbach, who had purchased it at a recent auction and re-sold it to our friends for presentation to the Library, for the same price that he had paid, foregoing the handsome profit he could otherwise have made.

A NOTEWORTHY MEETING

A meeting of the Friends of the Library, held in the Horace Howard Furness Memorial at the University Library on Thursday evening, September 27, was made memorable by two events of unusual interest: the presence of Dr. H. H. E. Craster, Librarian of the Bodleian Library, who was the principal speaker; and the presentation of the Franklin manuscript described in the preceding pages.

Dr. Penniman, presiding, introduced Dr. Craster, the present distinguished incumbent of the honored office of Bodley's Librarian, who gave a highly interesting and informative talk concerning the famous Oxford Library, its history, collections, building problems, position in the scheme of organization of the University, and service. He spoke also of the society of Friends of the Bodleian, the organization after which have been patterned a number of similar groups in this country, including the Friends of the University of Pennsylvania Library, telling briefly of its organization, its methods of operation, and its publications.

After Dr. Craster's address Dr. William Pepper was introduced, and told of the successful efforts which had been made to acquire the Franklin elegy for the Library; concluding his remarks by reading the "Receipt for making a New-England Elegy" and a few lines from the poem, illustrating its style. He then, on behalf of all the contributors, presented the precious manuscript to Dr. Penniman, who accepted it for the Library of the University.

Before adjournment Dr. Penniman spoke appreciatively of the large contribution which Mr. Cadwalader had made to the success of the Friends of the Library, serving as its president from the date of organization until his death, and giving generously of his time and interest.

After the meeting an informal reception was held in the Henry C. Lea Library, where the members and their friends had an opportunity to meet Dr. Craster and Mr. R. H. Hill, secretary to the Bodleian Library, who is accompanying him on his American tour.