

**WHO WAS THE MOTHER OF
FRANKLIN'S SON? AN
HISTORICAL CONUNDRUM,
HITHERTO GIVEN UP, NOW
PARTLY ANSWERED**

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Who was the mother of Franklin's son? An historical conundrum, hitherto given up, now partly answered by Paul Leicester Ford

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PAUL LEICESTER FORD

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HISTORICAL CONUNDRUM,

HITHERTO GIVEN UP—NOW PARTLY ANSWERED

BY

PAUL LEICESTER FORD.

"Speak of me as I am ; nothing extenuate
Nor set down aught in malice."

BROOKLYN, N. Y.

1889.

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ONE of the greatest penalties of fame is the attendant publicity it gives to all the actions and utterances of its winners. Everything said or done is sooner or later subject to microscopic study, and as this scrutiny is directed against men, not gods, it is but too evident that time, that silent but all powerful judge, will develop and investigate flaws and errors in even our greatest and best.

The interests of truth and history require a recognition and due weighing of these missteps, but with a certain *cult* they are dealt with in a way that to most readers and students savors too strongly of the popular idea of scandal-mongery. Attention is called to these failings, they are repeated and put in print. Undue prominence is given to the smallest incidents, and the whole too often smacks of ill-concealed pleasure. It seems as if mankind no sooner recognized the unusual worth of the individual than certain of the mass en-

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deavored

deavored at once to reduce him to his former position by calling attention to what in the ordinary man would probably have passed unnoticed, and which, while of a certain value in properly estimating the individual, has practically no importance in history.

There are few great men who more thoroughly took the public into their confidence than did Benjamin Franklin. In his Autobiography he sets down much that a partisan would wish unsaid, and especially is this true where he writes of his relations with women. The Franklin that he describes in his courtships of the two Philadelphian girls, or in his "foolish intrigues with low women," is not pleasant or improving reading unless Franklin's motives be thoroughly understood, and we can see the old, calm, affectionate philosopher, who once planned "a little work for the benefit of youth, to be called the *Art of Virtue*," deliberately cataloguing the "errata" of his life, "nothing extenuating," that humanity might profit by his faults and mistakes.

But his Autobiography is not the only way in which Franklin laid bare what in others would have remained untold. By his taking his illegitimate
son

son William to his home, and rearing him in every sense as a true son, he made his greatest fault the subject of public knowledge and comment. *

Imitating their contemporaries, now known as the "eulogistic school," the early biographers of Franklin passed over this fact without mention. † His grandson, son of this William, for obvious reasons could hardly treat of the matter, and in this he was followed by Weems, Woods, Duane and Weld, while Jared Sparks, the most historically earnest of the early writers, was by personal reasons debarred from saying aught of this affair. ‡

This entire suppression of the facts has, however,

* It is presumable that Franklin's silence in his Autobiograpby concerning this greatest erratum was due to that work having been written to this very son.

† The one exception to this I have found is given in a brief sketch of Franklin, purporting to have been written in 1776, printed in the London *Morning Post* of Tuesday, June 1st, 1779, where the author, who from a subsequent duel occasioned by one of these articles proved to be the Rev. Bennet Allen, says of him "he ingratiated himself with the ministry so far that they . . . made his natural son Governor of the Jerseys, which he still holds, and is a prisoner in Connecticut. He had this son by an oyster wench in Philadelphia, whom he left to die in the streets of disease and hunger."

‡ The biographers of William Franklin have paid but little attention to his birth. The sketch in *Public Characters of 1801-2*, which is evidently inspired by Governor Franklin, makes no mention of his birth being illegitimate. Whitehead and Kimer both merely mention the fact.

resulted

resulted in producing a reaction in his more recent biographers. Not content with producing and calling attention to this misstep, we have it served up with accessories and side-lights which, however interesting and picturesque, are children of the writers' brains, and quite as illegitimate as Franklin's son.

Mr. Theodore Parker was the first of these "critical historians," and in his *Historic Americans* (p. 52), he writes of Franklin: "In his private morals there were doubtless great defects, and especially in his early life much that was wrong and low. His temperament inclined him to vices of passion. He fell the way he leaned, and caught an abiding stain from his intrigues with low women . . . At the age of twenty-four he sought to negotiate a matrimonial engagement with a very deserving young woman. He demanded with her a portion of one hundred pounds, and required her father to mortgage his house to raise the money. The bargain was broken off, though the woman in question soon became the mother of his only son."

These statements were a little too glaring to pass unnoticed, and Edmund Quincy in a review of the
work

work in *The Nation* of February 2, 1871 (vol. XII, p. 77), wrote as follows: "Mr. Parker was not a man to call a spade anything but a spade. He is perfectly plain-spoken as to the immoralities of all his famous subjects in regard to women . . . Franklin's own narrative certainly absolves all commentators from any squeamishness as to him. The colors in which he draws himself are dark enough, but Mr. Parker gives the picture a yet darker hue. The figure which Franklin cuts in his own account of his breaking off his engagement with Miss Godfrey because her father could not give her enough money to pay off his debt to the printing house, is mean and paltry enough, but far from being so ineffably base as Mr. Parker represents it. He says, after relating the above facts 'the bargain was broken off, though the woman in question soon became the mother of his only son?' If Mr. Parker were alive and could prove this assertion, he would solve the one mystery about Franklin's life, to wit: who was the mother of William Franklin? It has baffled the curiosity of all other enquirers. Mr. Sparks assured us that he had looked it up in vain. The late eminent and lamented Alexander Dallas Bache, Franklin's grandson,