

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN
A Historical Play for Children
From the book, *Historical Plays for Children*”
by Grace E Bird and Maud Starling
1912

CHARACTERS:

-Benjamin Franklin
-James, his brother
-Their Father
-Their Mother
-An Old Woman
-Deborah Reed
-Deborah Reed's Mother
-A Small Child
-A Farmer
-A Farmer's Boy
-The King of France
-The Queen of France

SCENE I

Boston--a Small Room behind the Soap and Candle Shop of Benjamin Franklin's Father

(Benjamin, with his coat off, is reading a newspaper on a table covered with candle molds and wicks.)

FATHER: *(Entering.)* Benjamin, what in the world are you doing?

BENJAMIN: *(Putting the newspaper aside.)* I was just reading brother James's newspaper.

FATHER: Every time you find anything to read, you neglect your work. Have any customers been in here while I was out?

BENJAMIN: Yes, I sold a dozen candles to an old man.

FATHER: If you do not attend to business better, we shall soon have no more candles to sell.

BENJAMIN: I have finished cutting all these wicks. *(He picks up some wicks.)*

FATHER: *(Laughing.)* A candle needs something besides a wick. *(He picks up dish of tallow.)* This tallow will have to be melted again before you can pour it into these molds. *(He points to the molds.)*

BENJAMIN: *(Sighing.)* I hate candle-making.

FATHER: I have heard you say that before. I hope you are not lazy, my boy.

BENJAMIN: No, I am not lazy. I should like to go to sea.

FATHER: Put that notion out of your head at once. The life of a sailor is both hard and dangerous.

BENJAMIN: I know that, but I am tired of the stupid work here.

FATHER: What is good enough for your father should be good enough for you. I do not want to hear anymore grumbling. Get to work and try to be industrious.

(Benjamin obeys, after casting a few regretful glances at the newspaper.)

MOTHER: *(Entering, followed by about a dozen children.)* You children go out and play. It has stopped raining now, and you ought to be out of doors.

(The children go out.)

FATHER: Benjamin has been spending his time reading as usual, instead of working. He ought to have had all these candles done long ago, so that he could help you make the soap.

MOTHER: I can get along very well without him. The soap only needs stirring. *(She stirs the soap in a kettle.)*

FATHER: The boy has helped very little lately.

MOTHER: Perhaps he is not well.

FATHER: Oh, yes, he is all right; but he wants a new job. *(To Benjamin.)* How would you like to work for James in the newspaper business?

BENJAMIN: It would be very interesting to be a printer.

JAMES: *(Entering.)* Good morning.

FATHER: Good morning, James, we were just talking about you.

JAMES: I hope you were saying something good.

FATHER: I was wondering if you could do anything for Benjamin. He wants a change of employment.

JAMES: *(Sitting down.)* What does he want to do?

FATHER: I do not believe he knows himself.

JAMES: Then he had better stay where he is.

FATHER: I thought perhaps you could give him something to do in the printing office.

JAMES: I could, if he would work; but if he spends all his time reading he would not be of much use.

BENJAMIN: I would rather do anything than fill candle molds.

JAMES: That is easy compared with printing.

BENJAMIN: I know it. Everybody seems to think that I am lazy; but I am not looking for easy work. All I want is something interesting.

FATHER: What wages could you give the lad, James?

JAMES: The most I ever give to an apprentice is his room and board.

BENJAMIN: Give me two dollars without my board. I will board myself and save enough money to buy books to read.

FATHER: How could you do that?

BENJAMIN: Boiled potatoes and other vegetables suit me. I can get along without meat. I care more for learning than for eating.

MOTHER: You must not starve yourself. People who work must eat.

BENJAMIN: *(Laughing.)* No danger of my starving. My appetite is too good.

FATHER: I cannot understand where Benjamin gets his queer ideas. He is different from all the other members of the family on both sides.

JAMES: I will take the strange notions out of him, soon enough, if he neglects his work.

MOTHER: Do not be hard on him. He is a good boy.

BENJAMIN: When do you want me to begin? I am anxious to get rid of my present task.

JAMES: You may come over to the printing office now.

BENJAMIN: All right. Wait until I get my coat. *(He takes his coat down from a nail.)*

FATHER: Be industrious, Benjamin; and run over every evening to let us know how you are getting along.

BENJAMIN: Very well, Father. Goodbye, Mother.

(The two brothers go out.)

FATHER: *(Continuing the work Benjamin left.)* I do not see why Benjamin does not like to do this. I find it very interesting to make the candles look just right. *(A bell rings.)* There goes the bell on the shop door. I must attend to that customer. *(He goes out.)*

SCENE II
Philadelphia--a Street
Time--Sunday Morning

(Benjamin is walking along, eating a roll, with another under each arm, and his pockets stuffed out with his belongings. He is ragged and spattered with mud. An old woman with a child, walking in front of him, tumbles down. Deborah Reed, a young girl, rushes from a neighboring doorway to help her up. Franklin reaches the old woman first and helps her to rise. The rolls fall on the pavement.)

OLD WOMAN: Thank you, my boy.

FRANKLIN: I hope you are not hurt.

(Deborah picks up the rolls and brushes the dust off them.)

OLD WOMAN: No, I think not. I must have stubbed my toe.

DEBORAH: Have you walked far? You look tired.

OLD WOMAN: Yes, I am very tired. My grandson and I have had nothing to eat since yesterday.

FRANKLIN: *(Taking the rolls from Deborah.)* Let me share my breakfast with you and the boy.

OLD WOMAN: I hope I am not robbing you.

FRANKLIN: No, I have had more than enough. Take these. *(He hands a roll to the old woman and one to the child.)*

OLD WOMAN: *(Taking the roll.)* You are very kind. All I can give you in return is an old woman's blessing.

FRANKLIN: One could not ask for anything better.

(Old Woman and child go out, eating their rolls.)

DEBORAH: *(To Franklin.)* If you are hungry, my mother will give you something to eat.

FRANKLIN: Oh, no. I could not eat anymore.

DEBORAH: Your clothes are torn, and you are spattered with mud. Have you come far?

FRANKLIN: All the way from Boston. I tried to get work in New York, but decided I might have better luck here.

DEBORAH: You have walked a long distance.

FRANKLIN: I went to New York in a sailing vessel, but I have tramped fifty miles of the way from there.

DEBORAH: Why did you leave home?

FRANKLIN: I was working for my brother, and we did not get along very well together.

DEBORAH: Sit down here on our steps and tell me about it.

(They sit down.)

FRANKLIN: Well, he was cross, and I was saucy.

(They both laugh.)

DEBORAH: That was rather bad. What do you want to do now?

FRANKLIN: I am a printer, and I am looking for work.

DEBORAH: *(Pointing to his pockets.)* Did you carry all your belongings in your pockets?

FRANKLIN: Yes, I ran away; that is why I did not dare to borrow a bag.

DEBORAH: Can you do anything but printing?

FRANKLIN: Yes, I can write verses and stories. I used to slip them under the door of my brother's office, and he put them in his newspaper, thinking some one else wrote them.

DEBORAH: That was a good joke. Did you bring any of them with you?

FRANKLIN: Yes, here is one you may have if you want it. *(He takes a newspaper from his pocket, unfolds it, and shows Deborah the story that he wrote. She folds the paper up again.)*

DEBORAH: Thank you, I will read it tomorrow. My mother does not like to have me read newspapers on Sunday.

MOTHER: *(Appearing.)* To whom are you talking, Deborah?

DEBORAH: I did not ask his name. He helped a poor old woman who fell down in front of the house, and gave her most of his breakfast.

MOTHER: What is your name, my boy?

BENJAMIN: Benjamin Franklin. I am a printer by trade and am looking for work.

MOTHER: Have you been to see Bradford or Keimer? They might give you something to do.

FRANKLIN: No, I am going to hunt them up tomorrow.

MOTHER: Would you like something to eat?

FRANKLIN: No, thank you.

MOTHER: I hope you will find employment. If you do not succeed, I can give you some weeding to do in the garden next week. Deborah, come in and get ready for Sunday school.

DEBORAH: Goodbye, Benjamin.

FRANKLIN: Goodbye, Miss. (*Deborah and her mother go into the house.*) I wonder what her name is. I will try to find out; but now I must find some place where I can sleep tonight. Tomorrow I can look for work.

SCENE III

A Field

(A thunder storm is raging. Franklin is flying a kite. A Leyden jar stands at his feet.)

FARMER: (*Entering with Boy.*) Why are you standing out here? Very soon you will get soaked to the skin; and, besides, you may be struck by lightning.

BOY: See, Father, he is flying a kite, but it is not a bit like mine.

FRANKLIN: (*To Farmer.*) I suppose it does look foolish to stand out here flying a kite in a thunder storm; but if you are not in too much of a hurry I will show you what I am doing.

FARMER: Well, I should really like to know.

FRANKLIN: I am trying to find out what the lightning will do.

FARMER: If you will come down back of my house, I will show you what it can do. Our big elm tree was struck last spring, and now it is as black and dead as a piece of burnt wood.

FRANKLIN: I am trying to catch the lightning so that it will run in one direction instead of striking things at random.

FARMER: How can you do that?

FRANKLIN: If I can find out how to attract it I can attach a rod to a house; and if the lightning comes that way, it will get caught in the rod.

FARMER: Well, that beats anything I have ever heard of.

BOY: (*Seizing his father's arm.*) Oh, Father, that was an awful flash. I am afraid.

FARMER: Don't be afraid. See what a queer kite the man has.

FRANKLIN: The kite, as you see, is made of a silk handkerchief, with a metal point fastened to the top. Attached to the kite is a hemp string. At the other end is a key. Tied to the key is a silk ribbon to hold the kite by.

FARMER: Why do you use a metal point?

FRANKLIN: To attract the lightning. Then it runs along the hemp string to the key.

FARMER: Why doesn't it strike you when it gets to the key?

FRANKLIN: Because the silk ribbon in my hand will not carry the current.

BOY: Let me fly the kite.

(Franklin gives it to the Boy. A gust of wind raises it. A flash strikes fire on the key. The Boy drops the kite. Franklin catches it.)

BOY: That kite acts strangely. I am afraid of it.

FARMER: Do not let him have it again. He might get struck.

FRANKLIN: There is no danger so long as he does not touch the key where the lightning comes.

FARMER: What are you doing with that jar? *(He points to jar.)*

FRANKLIN: *(Picking up jar.)* I have filled it with sparks. Now I know that lightning and electricity are the same thing. They can both be caught in the same way.

BOY: *(Stretching out his hand.)* Father, it is raining like everything.

FARMER: Well, I think we had better be going home. That is a wonderful thing, but you will be drenched if you stay here much longer.

FRANKLIN: I will walk as far as the road with you. I have found out all I want to know at present. My next experiment will be with the lightning rod. If a small metal point catches some electricity, a long rod will do better.

SCENE IV

Versailles. Audience Chamber of Louis XVI, King of France

KING: *(Pointing to a seat.)* Be seated, Dr. Franklin. A man of your years and honorable deeds shall not stand in our presence.

FRANKLIN: If I might gain your Majesty's favor for my native land, I would willingly stand all day.

QUEEN: That is unnecessary. We are glad to listen to you. Your fame as an inventor, author, and statesman has preceded you.

FRANKLIN: (*Sitting down.*) As you know, we seek freedom from the unjust taxation of the Mother Country. With this in view, we wrote the Declaration of Independence. We are now framing a Constitution by which the United States shall be governed.

KING: Your Declaration is worthy of the respect of all the nations of the world.

QUEEN: I understand that Dr. Franklin helped to make it.

KING: That is only one of his valuable services.

FRANKLIN: Your Majesty flatters me. My only regret is that I am too old to serve my country by fighting side by side with its brave soldiers.

KING: The American colonies ought to be free from the oppression of England.

FRANKLIN: We lack money to pay our soldiers. A loan for this purpose is one of the requests that I have come to lay before your Majesty.

KING: We may need all our means to carry on wars of our own; but we will consider your request seriously and do our best for you.

FRANKLIN: Any help will be appreciated.

KING: If we should send soldiers to fight in your war, we ourselves might get into difficulties with England.

FRANKLIN: Burgoyne's surrender shows that our success is probable.

KING: That seems reasonable. The surrender of which you speak is very significant.

FRANKLIN: An alliance between France and America would be an advantage to both countries.

KING: We are favorably impressed with the idea, but must consider anything so important very carefully.

QUEEN: How many war vessels do you need?

FRANKLIN: About sixteen, your Majesty.

KING: If France takes part in the affairs of the colonies, it may mean war with England.

FRANKLIN: True; but the ruling family of Spain is so closely related to that of France that it would join hands with your Majesty. Indeed, Holland also might join the alliance for purposes of trade.

KING: You are well versed in the affairs of nations.

FRANKLIN: It is necessary that an ambassador study such subjects carefully.

QUEEN: How many of our men would you need to bring the war to a close?

FRANKLIN: Three or four thousand.

KING: That is a good many. We will, however, give the matter our immediate attention, and if possible we will make the alliance and grant you the loan.

FRANKLIN: I thank your Majesty. I will return for a decision before I sail back to America.

KING: You will not be kept waiting long.

(Franklin bows and passes out between the lines of courtiers.)

KING: *(To the Queen.)* Let us withdraw until the morrow, when we will consider the affairs of the brave American colonies.

(All go out, King and Queen followed by courtiers.)

CURTAIN