

“A tour de force”

Poor Richard's Lament

A most timely tale

Tom Fitzgerald

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I wish it were possible . . . to invent a method of embalming drowned persons in such a manner that they be recalled to life at any period, however distant; for, having a very ardent desire to see and observe the state of America a hundred years hence, I should prefer to any ordinary death the being immersed in a cask of Madeira wine, with a few friends, till the time, to be then recalled to life by the solar warmth of my dear country.

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN, 1754



Contents

PUBLISHER'S NOTE V

FOREWORD XI

Milestones in the Life of Benjamin Franklin xix

Book I

Great Expectations 1

Celestial Chamber of B. Franklin 3
17 January 1706–17 April 1790

The White House 7
September 16th, 6:07 a.m.

Book II

Trials 35

Celestial Chamber of B. Franklin 37
17 January 1706–17 April 1790

New York City 111
September 16th, 9:43 a.m.

Supreme Celestial Court of Petitions 121

N. 37th and Mt. Vernon, W. Philadelphia 167
September 16th, 12:51 p.m.

Supreme Celestial Court of Petitions 185

Book III

Tribulations 271

One Milk Street, Boston, MA 273
September 17th, 6:13 a.m.

West Philadelphia 383
September 17th, 1:09 p.m.

New York City	395
<i>September 17th, 2:43 p.m.</i>	
University of Pennsylvania Hospital	481
<i>September 17th, 5:32 p.m.</i>	
30th Street Station, Philadelphia	493
<i>September 17th, 8:09 p.m.</i>	
West Wing, the White House	557
<i>September 22nd, 6:23 a.m.</i>	
Celestial Chamber of B. Franklin	569
<i>17 January 1706–17 April 1790</i>	

Book IV

Circles 571

Celestial Chamber of B. Franklin	573
<i>17 January 1706–17 April 1790</i>	
Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania	581
<i>June 17, 7:32 a.m.</i>	
Supreme Celestial Court of Petitions	583
Children's Hospital	585
<i>3959 Broadway, New York, June 17th, 8:19 a.m.</i>	
The White House	591
<i>September 17th, 5:35 a.m.</i>	
217 South 47th Street, Philadelphia, PA	595
<i>September 22nd, 5:44 a.m.</i>	
Corner of Washington & School Streets	603
<i>Boston, MA, January 17th, 9:13 a.m.</i>	
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	605
CAST OF CHARACTERS	613

Foreword

Michael W. Zuckerman

Poor *Richard's Lament* is not only a grand and gorgeous novel; it is also, as Fitzgerald's Franklin might put it, a most timely one. At a time when a host of economic and social ills is causing many of us to contemplate a world beyond materialism and narcissism, *Poor Richard's Lament* juices up the process with an ever-building sense of moral urgency. Toward this end, this hugely ambitious imagination (nine years in the making) moves seamlessly from savage diagnosis to prophecy; from lush inventiveness to inspiration; from damning indictment to redemption.

Where to begin to sing the praises of this singular work? Perhaps by confessing that, as an historian who has devoted a goodly portion of his professional life to studying the life and times of Benjamin Franklin, I was not far into the first half of Fitzgerald's delicious invention when I found myself marveling at the depth of the author's understanding of America's greatest Founding Father as well as the long-ago world in which this great man moved. Fitzgerald had clearly done his homework.

I did wonder, though, whether—despite the dynamism of the courtroom histrionics that dominate the first half of the book—others might be so taken. Indeed, at first blush, these early pages seemed to me they might hold far more fascination for those steeped in the sensibilities of 18th-century America than for those who were largely innocent of such. And as much as I found myself fascinated by Fitzgerald's devastating case for the prosecution, in the fanciful celestial court before which Franklin stands trial, I also found myself wishing to get back to Fitzgerald's interwoven tales of the present, and of the skullduggerous ethic of “a little conveniency of expediency” that Fitzgerald's Franklin would, bit by painful bit, learn to lament.

Little did I reckon with Fitzgerald's audacity! Little did I anticipate

that, with a little patience, I would soon enough have Ben in the very midst of the sordid Machiavellians of our own time! Little did I appreciate that Fitzgerald would have the brilliance to sustain two distinct dictions—almost two distinct languages—as 18th-century Ben engaged 21st-century America!

There is, in fact, sheer genius in Fitzgerald's imagination of Ben Franklin in the twenty-first century. *Poor Richard's Lament* sees our world as Ben would have encountered it in all its manifold strangeness and, at the same time, makes completely plausible Ben's deciphering of it. Fitzgerald accomplishes this astonishing feat over and over and over again, versus just making one Herculean effort in that direction, for effect, then giving himself a pass on the rest. Fitzgerald dares to put Ben into our world *literally*—diction, clothes, bifocals, cane, gout, and all.

There is genius also in the way in which Fitzgerald draws a most telling indictment of our mutual alienation from one another and our common indifference toward each other. He shows us to ourselves, terrifyingly, through the ways in which our barbaric isolation from one another strikes Ben's 18th-century sensibility. And he does all this with sly comedic wit and dazzling verbal virtuosity, multiplying, and multiplying again, the deft ways in which Ben deflects the occasional strays who do actually notice his oddness, fending off their curiosity without ever descending into dishonesty.

Fitzgerald's wizardry with words comes through most breathtakingly in the daring way he pitches his tent right on Franklin's aphoristic turf. From start to finish, he propounds Poor Richardisms all his own, many of them so good that Franklin would have envied them and, as was his wont, stolen them. Better still, Fitzgerald uses those succulent nuggets exactly as paradoxically as Franklin did, affirming the power of the past at every turn, even as he insists we can set that power at naught.

For all that Fitzgerald gives us a reformed Franklin, he also catches exquisitely the old one, in all the equipoise of intense seriousness and incorrigible playfulness of which he was such a rare master. If there is any way at all in which *Poor Richard's Lament* misses Ben, it may be that it renders him intelligible in the urgency of his desperation to make amends, whereas the historical Franklin coiled himself in impenetrable ironies that we will never quite penetrate.

If I have any other historian's pedantic criticism of this remarkable historical fiction, it is that the displacement of egoistic isolation by

way of a compassionate concern for others that Fitzgerald imagines in Ben's second chance was, to my mind, already evident in Ben in his first time round. Maybe not with his wife and children, but with virtually everyone else (including slaves).

Nonetheless, I like Fitzgerald's imagined Ben better than I like my "historical" one. And not just because redemption makes a better story, but also because Ben's desperate repentance, in the one day that the novel grants him to come back to life in the twenty-first century, makes him endearingly reckless as he never was for long in life. I adored watching Fitzgerald make Ben's every outlandish gambit and suicidally foolhardy gamble seem somehow plausible, even verisimilitudinous, in a veritably Enlightened magic realism. I adored the connections and coincidences that strain credulity yet unfold so naturally that I began waiting avidly for what would unfold next and how it would work in the gleefully convoluted plot line that itself asserts so exuberantly the kindredness of all humankind across the centuries.

There are a hundred hits here, maybe a hundred hundred. The pleasures of Fitzgerald's prose, passion, and intelligence pervade every page. There is not only a brilliant weaving of race and gender inequality but also a still more brilliant weaving of Ben's unforgivingness toward his son William and the unforgivableness of Ben's capitulation on slavery and the three-fifths clause, all entwined with consummate artistry by way of a single metaphor: "for want of a nail."

There is also the gorgeous turning of Ben's own words and best principles against him throughout the prosecution, and the excruciating detail of Ben's heartlessness toward his wife, his children, and even his grandson, on and on, now one, now the other, now the one again, the probing going ever deeper and the pain growing ever more palpable, the more because Fitzgerald understands and evokes the plight and the heroism of those forgotten members of Franklin's family so keenly. Even I, an ardent Franklin admirer, felt a sympathy for them, and a horror toward Franklin, I had never felt before.

Fitzgerald can coin fabulous phrases, as in "the miracle of compound disinterest." He has a pitch-perfect ear, as in the succession of news clips that he concocts so convincingly that I was through the first ten of them, thinking he'd just found them and cobbled them together here before it began to dawn on me that he'd made them all up. He has an extraordinary way with words, as in the prophetic Poor Richardism, *When the grease of commerce is falsehood, how long before the wheels fall*

off the wagon? He can catch vast implications in a few clauses, as in the pithy Poor Richardism that for people to give a shit, they must first be led to the privy, a veritable if vulgar epigram for the whole book.

But the beauty of this book is not just in its verbal pyrotechnics, ravishing though they are. It is, still more, in the constant breath of humane inspiration that guides a steady succession of searing, soaring triumphs of communion and caritas. Fitzgerald is that rarest of birds: a great writer and a great soul. He has summoned from unfathomable depths of despair an imagining of the greatest of Americans that is not only better than the original but also worthy of his own remarkable spirit.

MICHAEL W. ZUCKERMAN
University of Pennsylvania
Philadelphia, PA

Celestial Chamber of B. Franklin

17 January 1706–17 April 1790

Ben could not recall having been quite so ebullient in the 200-odd years of his confinement. The closest likely he had come in this regard had occurred on the occasion of his completing the thirteenth and final volume of his *Autobiography*, near a century ago now, or so it did seem.

He had been particularly ebullient on that occasion, he now recalled, for having resolved a most vexing dilemma—whether to close his personal history with the ratification of the Constitution, 17 September 1787, or to extend it by another thirty months, precisely, such as to include the occasion of his very last breath upon Earth, 17 April 1790.

Felicitously, he had chosen the ratification event, firstly because it was climactic in and of itself, and secondly because it had allowed him to crown his personal history with perhaps the finest oratory of his eighty-four years on earth—which oratory he had managed to capture in full, every word of it, not by recollecting it, which he could not do, but by returning himself to the actual event, by no greater than thinking upon it, as one thinks upon a thumb such as to frolic it, and witnessing thereby Mr. Wilson, his more-than-adequate surrogate that day, put flesh and blood upon every syllable, as only that gentleman could do.

Mister President:

I confess that there are several parts of this constitution which I do not at present approve, but I am not sure I shall never approve them; for having lived long, I have experienced many instances of being obliged by better information, or fuller consideration, to change opinions even on important subjects, which I once thought right, but found to be otherwise. It is therefore that the older I grow,

the more apt I am to doubt my own judgment, and to pay more respect to the judgment of others.

Most men indeed as well as most sects in religion think themselves in possession of all truth, and that wherever others differ from them it is so far error. Steele a Protestant in a dedication tells the Pope that the only difference between our churches in their opinions of the certainty of their doctrines is the Church of Rome is infallible and the Church of England is never in the wrong.

Though never an orator of the esteem of an Adams or a Whitefield, Ben adjudged his oratory of that occasion, although delivered by a surrogate, the most momentous of his efforts in that category of persuasion, more so even than his argument before Commons against the Stamp Act, and therefore the perfect instrument by which to bring to close an accounting of a long and not altogether undistinguished tenure upon earth.

And there's an end on it!

Ben chuckled to visitation now, before mind's eye, of a dainty apparition. Dipping pen to ink, he committed his visitor unto an enduring preservation before she might withdraw into the very aether from whence she had only just emerged, as all such were wont to do.

We are the slaves of our biology
and of our ideology
But the clowns of our theology.

He read the rhyme twice more, and upon issuing a last chuckle, pinned a label on her, 706, such as to mark her sequence in an accumulation of kindred other such, they to be put to press one day as *A Compendium of Lit'l Ditties and Doodles, for the General Amusement of the Irredeemably Idle* by Philomena Micklewick.

Feeling farther encroachment now of a fatigue most agreeable, Ben snuffed the candles at either side of his writing desk, the tallow of the one being ruby red, that of the other being sapphire blue. Rising then, he hobbled to the chessboard adjacent to his reading chair, whereat a drooling candle, emerald green, yet burned, and smiled upon the sheaf of scribblings, only recently reviewed by him, on which his formal petition had, he trusted, been expertly wrought.

He would peruse these sheets again on the morrow, he allowed, such that he might not wait too closely upon a certain Intermediary likely

to be irksomely tardy, and also, as icing upon cake, such that he might kindle an agreeable smolder of anticipation concerning the effect the major credits of his life would have upon—

Precisely *whom?* Precisely *what?*

Reasonableness, surely!

Entering into his bed chamber, Ben avoided taking notice of the furnishings marking the very chamber in which he had breathed his last. Although he had attempted several times over to supplant this chamber with another—that at 7 Craven; that at Passy; even that at Fort Hamilton—he had, for no cause ever communicated to him, been restricted all these scores of years to this unhappy chamber, by way of being denied all efficacy toward imagining another into its place.

Shedding himself of his old brown suit, the very one in which he had been buried, Ben caught glimpse of a most comical image in a looking glass attached upon the wall to rightward, this instrument being neither expected by him there nor added by him. The glass, in being near floor to ceiling in extension, and ornamented in rococo, tended to render the image presently within it—this being a close likeness to (dare he confess it?) a puffball—all the more comical.

Have we here the beauty, Dr. Franklin, or have we the beast?

Dr. Franklin chuckled, and pulling on his nightshirt, crawled under the coverlet on his four-poster, this badly in need of a tightening, and had little sooner snuffed out the fleece-white candle upon the nightstand than was visited by another apparition before mind's eye. Well knowing he would be tortured the night through over retaining memory upon morning of a visitation but nary a notion of the visitor, he crawled from his bed, and feeling his way into his study, rekindled the wicks at either side of his writing desk. He thereupon scribbled, with swift strokes, a dainty little ditty upon the same sheet on which he had preserved the previous such:

If puffballs were to choose
 the most beautiful puffball of all
 Would they choose one round and fat
 or one lean and tall?

Issuing more a giggle than a chuckle, Ben affixed a label to this newest foundling, this being the number 707.

Such a generosity of mischief in one evening, Ben allowed, had truly

to be an omen! Indeed, he would sleep this night through as if upon a cloud of contentment, or he would toss about as if upon a sea of anticipation—it mattered not.

The morrow was nowise to be just another day.

The White House

September 16th, 6:07 a.m.

Gilbert felt a flutter of anticipation as he relinquished his tote to the willing servitude of his chair. He smiled.
He'd *never* top it. It was the *perfect* gift.
He triggered the latch on his tote.

No one would ever know, of course, except the President—and Tom—but that didn't matter in the least. The true pleasure of influence—the only form of power worth the bother—was not in having it noticed, but in having it. Notice was for the irredeemably puerile—the Bill Clintons and Paul Kenyons of the world—those who seemed driven as if by force of addiction to organize their lives around being forever the center of attention.

Gilbert's smile deepened on a seventyish face that, although puffed and shadowed around the eyes, exuded the dignity and confidence of a man who knew exactly who he was and precisely how much he was worth.

Dr. Gilbert Henry Bahr had long since inventoried the particulars of his genius and found them lacking in no significant regard.

Which, for the President, was a damn good thing.

Opening his tote, Gilbert pulled a book-size package from the only compartment that wasn't stuffed with folders showing a red, blue, or green tab. The package itself was wrapped in glazed white paper, perfectly squared at the corners, and was bound with red, white, and blue ribbons culminating in, at one end, offset to one side, an elegant tri-color blossom.

Gilbert glanced at his watch, and pressing a button on a desk console, received an almost instantaneous response. "Good morning, sir. Costa Rican Excelsior today. Shall I bring you a cup?"

“Oh, good, great—yes—in a sec. I’ve got to step out for a minute. I’ll stop by on my way back. Any calls?”

“Director Fiske left a message on your voice mail. He’d like you to call him at your earliest convenience—on his private number.”

“When did he call?”

“His message was stamped 5:43 a.m.”

“OK, thanks.”

“I’ll have your coffee waiting for you.”

“Excelsior, right?”

“Yes sir.”

“Perfect. I’ll be right back.”

Gilbert slipped the gift package—the bloomless end—under his belt, against a stomach as flat as it had been half a century earlier, and buttoning his suitcoat, made certain nothing of the package showed. Exiting his office then, through his private entrance, he bore right and headed down the crimson-carpeted corridor toward the southwest corner of the wing. Walking briskly, he responded to eye contacts with perfunctory grunts and nods. At Morrie Stern’s office, he turned left and headed toward the southeast corner of the wing.

Entering the open door to Teresa Gutierrez’s office, Gilbert glanced toward Stephanie Blanchard’s desk—Stephanie usually didn’t get in until around 7:00—then slipped the package from under his belt, and keeping his back toward the doorway, held the package close in, such that only someone in the direction of Teresa’s desk could see it.

By Morrie Stern’s decree, absolutely no personal gifts, of any kind, no exceptions, were to be given to the President by individual staff members. In each of the previous three years, however, Gilbert and Teresa had conspired—Gilbert had suggested, Teresa had acquiesced—to supplement their own modest contributions to the group gift with “a little something extra,” because of “our unique relationship with the President.”

Teresa looked up without interrupting a dance of flawlessly choreographed fingers over her keyboard. Gilbert beheld this miracle, as he usually did, with deep reverence. His own fingers knew where the keys were, but only for as long as his eyes remained fixed generally on the keyboard. The moment he would divert his eyes, as Teresa had just done, his memory map would go blank, as if by wave of wand, and he would type gibberish.

He had noticed this same affliction, and similar, in other males of the species, and some decades ago, the nascent psychologist in him

had formed a theory. Because males tended to be more averse than females were to making mistakes, as a function likely of a Y-mediated fear of appearing weak, males instinctively tended to play it safer than females did when learning new tricks, so to say. Hence, instead of willfully engaging in error until rote competence should emerge, males tended to keep their eyes on the keyboard in order to *prevent* error, to the unfortunate end of denying themselves any possibility of inscribing upon their prideful psyches an indelible memory map.

So completely were males suffused with this kind of innate stupidity, Gilbert had posited, that in most cases it couldn't be excised without gutting the entire corpus.

After first formulating this theory, back in his third year at Andover, Gilbert had begun to look for patterns of male behavior that would tend to support it, and had no sooner begun his search than was reminded, one late-spring afternoon at Fenway, of his father's only paternal counsel to him, delivered several years earlier when his father, a fervent Red Sox fan, was trying to teach his only son how to hit a baseball: "Keep your eyes on the ball! See? This thing! Keep your eyes on *it*—not me. You can't hit what you're not looking at!"

In that epiphanous moment at Fenway, Gilbert had grasped his father's true message: "Do not strike out. Do not embarrass me. Do not *shame* me."

Indeed, when it came to human behavior, Gilbert had discovered, all Gaul was divided into not three parts but only two—*innate* instinct on the one hand; *instilled* instinct (a.k.a. belief) on the other. And it was knowledge of this simple truth that was the source of all political efficacy. Want to control the voting behavior of women? Identify the individual strands of innate female instinct—Yin-stinct, Gilbert had called it in one of his books—the female's reflexive deference toward male authority, for example—and manipulate these as if strings on a marionette. Want to control the voting behavior of religious wing-nuts? Identify the individual tenets of their instilled beliefs—Americans are exceptional in the eyes of God, for example—and manipulate these as if strings on a marionette.

It was just *that* simple.

Pompous pretenders like John Adams, hopelessly pinched and pruned as they were with Puritanism, or some other desiccating astringency of mind, never understood this. True geniuses like Benjamin Franklin, ol' twinkle and a nod himself, did.

Teresa, eyeing the package Gilbert was holding, smiled. "A little

something for the birthday boy?” A distinctive accent betrayed an extra-national origin.

In fact, Teresa had spent the first eighteen years of her life in Mexico, mostly in Juarez, but had been living in the United States for over twenty-seven years now, mostly in El Monte, east of Los Angeles, where she had resided, with the youngest of her three children, when President-elect James Michael Kinney phoned her out of the blue one early-November morning—in fact, at 5:33 a.m.—to ask her to serve as his private secretary.

Little did Teresa suspect—or give any indication of suspecting, anyway—that the man standing in front of her at that moment had been the chief architect of her Cinderella-like transformation from obscure legal secretary in a five-person ethnic law firm in L.A., into the private secretary of the President of the United States of America.

Gilbert had first taken notice of Teresa during a visit he had made to LA over four years ago now, to make arrangements for a crucially important primary rally for then-candidate Kinney. Teresa was one of the worker bees that Roger Hornby, California state chair of the Kinney campaign, had recommended to the rally committee to help plan the event. Gilbert had found Teresa an interesting anomaly—a Chicano woman working for Republican causes—but had sensed more, and in making discreet inquires, had discovered Teresa to be, in fact, a poster mother of self-reliance and personal responsibility. Abandoned by a faithless husband, she had raised three children single-handedly, first by earning a college degree at night while holding down two cleaning jobs, and then by running her own home-based transcription service, until it began to detract from her motherhood duties, and finally by becoming a high-paid (relatively) legal secretary.

Put a worker bee of a certain complexion into a position of real versus symbolic responsibility, Gilbert had counseled the President-elect in the early morning following the President’s razor-thin victory, and one or two other worker bees of a certain complexion were certain to take notice—and well before the next election.

In the dog-eat-dog world of politics, Gilbert had further counseled the President-elect, *any* advantage could be, and increasingly was, tantamount to *every* advantage.

Smiling knowingly, Teresa motioned with her head. “Go on in.”

Gilbert entered the chamber in which he had been meeting with the President every morning now for the past three years. Instead of bearing right, however, as usual, toward the facing two-seat couches,

Gilbert steered toward the President's desk, the same one that John Kennedy Jr. had made famous by peeking through the knee hole, before it was paneled over. The golden drapes framing the three floor-to-ceiling windows behind the desk seemed almost incandescent, like autumn aspens at forest's edge.

Gilbert took special notice of the two alabaster figurines symmetrically positioned on the desktop. The closer one, "Industry," depicted a man, eyes cast downward, wielding a scythe; the farther one, "Frugality," depicted a woman, eyes cast downward, trundling a loom. Gilbert had given these pieces of Franklinitis to the President exactly three years ago, to great effect, but in so doing had left himself little room in which to trump them—

Until today, of course!

Moving behind the desk, Gilbert noticed that Teresa's gift package, resting on the seat of the President's chair, appeared to be precisely the size of his own.

O God!

Gilbert grinned.

O happiness! It didn't matter!

Hearing Teresa's phone ring, Gilbert checked his watch. It was a bit early. Ten minutes, in fact. The President, Gilbert surmised, had seen the latest poll numbers.

Perfect.

Placing his package next to the other, Gilbert hurried back into Teresa's office and found Teresa just rising from her chair.

"The President's on his way down," Teresa said, smiling. "You might as well stay and save me the call."

Gilbert hesitated just long enough for Teresa to make the decision. "This is not going to be an ordinary day."

Gilbert followed Teresa back into the Oval, and Teresa disappearing into the President's dining room, sat down in the further of the two facing couches. These stood perpendicular to the massive Resolute desk, and in so doing often reminded Gilbert, as they did now, of the chapel at Bowdoin, where the pews were arranged in like fashion relative to the altar.

Gilbert enjoyed these little happenstances of similarity, and the private, often amusing symbolologies they often elicited, even if they were not fresh out of the oven.

Taking a deep breath, Gilbert looked toward the open door to Teresa's office and entertained the notion of making a dash for it. He