

I BORE BENJAMIN FRANKLIN'S LOVE CHILD!

by Tony Gabriele

Note: This story is fiction, but it is based on fact. Benjamin Franklin took Deborah Read as his common-law wife in 1730, when he was 25 years old. About the same time – a precise date is unknown – he fathered a child by another woman. It was his son William, whom he acknowledged as his and whom he raised. The identity of William's mother remains a mystery to this day.

'Tis strange, but I remember her more clearly than him. From those days, I mean. Nowadays, he's the fine gentleman, bustling at the Assembly house, hobnobbing with the wellborn and the philosophers. Even raising up a militia, in case we go to war with the French. I see him now and then, at a distance in the street.

And William with him, sometimes. A good-looking young man, about the same age his father was when I met him. Helped his father with those queer electrical experiments, they say. He likes fine clothes, fancier than his father's. He has his father's chin. And my nose.

But the memory has faded. Seeing him now, grown older and dignified, I cannot summon up the man's appearance then. Except I remember his arms, how strong they were. He told me he once swam three miles up and down the Thames River, when he was living in London. Could have been a swimming instructor if he fancied it, he said. "Instruct me," I said then, saucily. "Demonstrate your strokes." Yes, I do remember us laughing together.

But her, I can see her as if it was last week, appearing at my door. It was the surprise, I imagine, that has kept the memory fresh. Night had fallen – she would hardly have made a visit like this in the broad daylight, now would she? – but as I opened the door I could see her clearly, as the light from the fireplace fell upon her. A bit plump she was, with a round face, not pretty but pleasant enough if she would smile. She was not smiling, and her deep blue eyes fixed upon mine and held them.

After a moment, she said, “I want to see the babe.”

“Why -- who are you?” I asked.

There was another brief pause, and she said, slowly, as if she were speaking a foreign language: “I am the wife of Mr. Franklin.”

Now it was my turn to be struck dumb. Finally I stammered, “Mr. Franklin isn’t – I’m mean I didn’t know that – oh, come in please.”

She came into the room. I offered her the one good chair and she sat down carefully, like she didn’t want to touch anything she didn’t have to, her hands clutching the folds of her dress, which was not fancy but looked new.

“I’m sorry,” I said, “I don’t have any tea to offer you.” A luxury like tea wasn’t much seen in my house.

There was another moment of silence, while she looked hard at me. And then she said, “You are pretty.” Ah, but I was pretty, in those days. “You are pretty,” she said again, and then, “but I am his wife. I am his wife,” she repeated, as if it were a thing to wonder at.

“Not much chance of him marrying the likes of me,” I said, which was the truth. Ben – Mr. Franklin – knew I had been with other men, knew that I was not the kind of woman that respectable businessmen like him would ever be expected to marry. And a fine pair we would have made, him a printer and me not able to read! But he was kinder than the others, kind as well as humorous. Yes, there was a moment or two when I foolishly hoped, but then –

As she was reading my mind, then she said, “I am curious to know – how did he react? When you told him you were with child?”

“Ah, madam,” I said, “how does any man react when told he in the way of fathering a bastard? Unless he’s some grand king or lord, for whom it’s just another day’s work?” I had meant that last as a small endeavor at a joke, but she did not smile. “Dismayed he was, at first, like any man. Had a bad day and night of it, I tell you. But on the morrow, he came around and said he would acknowledge the child as his own, take it and raise it. That was good of him, it was. Another man would have fled. Or tried to get me to, well, dispose of the child.” I added, “Is that why you’ve come, then?”

She did not answer at first. She looked slowly around the room – not much to look at, a rough table and some benches, humble crockery on the shelves, not very clean, either, I'm sorry to say – then finally turned back toward me. “I just wanted to see the babe,” she said.

“He’s asleep,” I said, “but I’ll fetch him.” I went into the other room, where his cradle was, and lifted him up, keeping the blanket wrapped around him. As he came into the light from the fireplace, he stirred, opened his eyes and began to whimper, soft at first, then some small, mewling cries. “He wants nursing, I suppose,” I said as I sat back on the bench. Reaching back with my other hand, I loosened my stays a bit, then lowered my blouse to give him my breast.

She watched me nurse for a while, seeming curious about the act. I grew a bit self-conscious, and to break the silence I said, “I am sorry, but I do not believe I know your name.”

“I am Deborah, Deborah Read. Deborah Franklin now, I suppose.” That did strike me odd, that word, “suppose.” And I said:

“I did not know. Your wedding was not long ago?”

“There was no wedding. No church wedding, at any rate.”

The surprise must have been plain on my face. I had assumed she was a proper churchgoing lady – as indeed she was, and is. She owed me no explanation, to be sure, me a mother with no wedding ceremony of my own. But she explained, nonetheless.

“I was married before,’ she said, “to a potter, John Rogers. A charming fellow. He beguiled me so, I took no notice of his inability to make any money. And then there came the rumors, that he had a wife in England, and had abandoned her. I left him and went back to my parents’ house, and he ran off to the West Indies, fleeing his debts. We heard that he died there.”

“And then you met Mr. Franklin?”

“I had already known Benj- ... Mr. Franklin. He boarded with my parents when he first arrived in Philadelphia. In fact, I first laid eyes on him even before that, on what he tells me was his very first day in the city. He had just got off a boat landed at the Delaware River docks. Dirty, lonely, and just 17 years old, walking up Market Street, past our house. I was standing in the doorway and saw him. What a sorry sight he was, and he told me afterwards that he knew it!” For the first time since she arrived, a slight smile brightened her face.

“We became close while he lived with us, and indeed we talked of marriage. But my father said we were too young at the time, as I suppose we were. Then he went off to England, and I met Mr. Rogers. Then Rogers was gone, and Mr. Franklin came back,

setting himself up as a printer. My father had since died, and my mother and I had little money. So now Mr. Franklin's attentions were most welcome."

"But," she went on, "we had no proof that Rogers was indeed dead. What if he were to reappear? If we were formally wedded, I should stand accused of bigamy."

"And so," I said, "instead of a church wedding ..."

"He and I have lived together since last September. We are husband and wife under English common law, and are legally recognized as such under the laws of Pennsylvania."

I had some touch of sympathy for her then. She was the new wife of Benjamin Franklin, already one of the city's best-regarded businessmen – and I was no one's wife, nor ever to be one – but she'd had her own sorrows, true enough.

The baby's little belly was filled now, and he lay quiet in my arms, looking up with half-opened eyes. I asked Deborah Franklin if she would like to hold him. She nodded yes. "Mr. Franklin told me he is to be named William," I said as I handed the child over.

She sat with the baby in her lap for several minutes, looking down at his pink face – the remnants of milk drying on his tiny lip – with an expression I could not decipher. The time is come, I thought. Now is when little William is taken from me. I should be

grateful, grateful that Mr. Franklin has claimed him as his son, that he will be raised in better circumstances than I could ever provide. I was grateful. But I was not happy. No mother could be.

“Will you be taking him tonight?” I asked after a while.

She looked up at me, then down at the baby, then at me again. “No,” she said. “I will not be taking him. Mr. Franklin will send for him soon.”

She stood and handed the baby back to me. She remained on her feet, took a deep breath, and said, “It is Mr. Franklin’s child. It is not mine. It is his child to raise. Perhaps I should feel differently, but I confess I do not.” She looked down at little William, fast asleep again. “I thought, perhaps, if I saw the child -- if I held it -- that might change my mind. I did not think it would, but I needed to know if it would. And it did not.”

I nodded. I thought of telling her that she would be giving Mr. Franklin children of her own, but that would be foolish. Of course she knew that already. As she did, a daughter and a son. Poor child, the son died at four years old. Smallpox. Her son died, mine lives yet. If there is any meaning to that, I do not know what it is.

“I should be going,” she said. “I understand that Mr. Franklin has made some provision for you?”

“Yes,” I said. “He has been most considerate.” And without another word, she went out the door, into the dark street, and her footsteps on the cobblestones faded away. I never saw her after that. While her husband travels, I hear she is a homebody who rarely leaves her Market Street neighborhood.

Mr. Franklin has truly been considerate. Though he is under no obligation, save for his own conscience, he continues to this day to send money regularly. It is sent quietly, though a trusted third party, to conceal my identity. It is not a large sum, but it keeps body and soul together, added to what I can earn as a seamstress.

For a while there were other men, giving me money for my company. But no longer, not at my age. Although Mr. Franklin once wrote a humorous piece for his newspaper, arguing that amorous young men in search of a mistress should prefer an older woman.

I wondered at first if he thought of me when he wrote it. But I suppose not.