MORSE'S LIFE OF FRANKLIN.*

MR. MORSE, whose biographies of the two Adamses and of Jefferson have given much of its high character to the admirable "American Statesmen" series, apologizes for writing a new life of Franklin, after Mr. Parton's "delightful work," which the Hon. John Bigelow declares "has left no place in English literature for another biography of this most illustrious of our countrymen." Mr. Bigelow is probably right so far as a voluminous work is concerned. But there will always be room and need for brief biographies of the man who stands next to Washington among the great men of the Revolutionary time, and whose renown has a singularly rounded amplitude which even Washington's cannot claim.

In any case Mr. Morse has justified the existence of his own work by its intrinsic value. He does not need to rely at all upon the fact that "without a life of Franklin this series would have appeared as absurdly imperfect as a library of English fiction with Scott or Thackeray absent from the shelves." He has narrated the career of Franklin chiefly as a statesman, from the standpoint of a thorough student of the politics and diplomacy of the period. His judgments have an agreeable freedom from conventionality, and his admiration for his great subject, while deep, is not blind. He perceives that "with Franklin every virtue had its market value" in a good sense, "and to neglect to get that value out of it was the part of folly." His hero's fondness for a little flattery does not escape him. But the Franklin of *Poor Richard's Almanac*, whom it is easy to cry down as a mere utilitarian, Mr. Morse knows how to estimate rightly:

> "'Poor Richard' was the avowed and popular schoolmaster of a young nation during its period of tutelage. His teachings are among the powerful forces which have gone to shaping the habits of Americans. His terse and picturesque bits of the wisdom and the virtue of this world are familiar in our mouths today; they moulded our great-grandparents and their children; they have informed our popular traditions; they still influence our actions, guide our ways of thinking, and establish our points of view with the constant control of acquired habits which we little suspect. . . . A broad, human creature with a marvelous knowledge of mankind, with a tolerance as far-reaching as his knowledge, with a kindly liking for all men and women; withal a prudent, shrewd, cool-headed observer in affairs, he was content to insist that goodness and wisdom were valuable, as means, towards good repute and well-being, as ends."

Mr. Morse opens his work, which, of course, has to deal chiefly with Franklin as perhaps the greatest diplomatist of the century, in England and France, with four chapters on his preliminary career in Philadelphia as a great citizen. Between three chapters which recount his services in his long second mission to England, and three others devoted to his diplomatic life in France, a brief chapter epitomizes his intervening "services in the States," and four more describe Franklin as a financier, his habits of life and business, the peace negotiations, the last years in France, and his closing services to his country as President of Pennsylvania and member of the Constitutional Convention. He was one of the few men who have wished to live again, if their careers had to be repeated. Certainly among all great Americans he is the one man who would most intensely enjoy the privilege of intruding himself into the company of posterity, to vary the application of one of his most characteristically genial sayings. None the less certain is it that no American of all the past would be greeted with a warmer affection. For "among illustrious Americans, Franklin stands preëminent in the interest which is aroused by a study of his mind, his character, and his career. One becomes attached to him, bids him farewell with regret, and feels that for such as he the longest span of life is all too short."

We must indulge ourselves in one more quotation from the concluding pages of this most attractive biography. "A man of greater humanity never lived. . . . Intellectually there are few men who are Franklin's peers in all the ages and nations. He covered, and covered well, vast ground. . . . It is hard indeed to give full expression to a man of such scope in morals, in mind, and in affairs. He illustrates humanity in an astonishing multiplicity of ways at an infinite number of points. He, more than any other, seems to show us how many-sided our human nature is. . . . A man of active as well as universal good will, of perfect trustfulness towards all dwellers on the earth, of supreme wisdom expanding over all the interests of the race, none has earned a more kindly loyalty. By the instruction which he gave, by his discoveries, by his inventions, and by his achievements in public life, he earns the distinction of having rendered to men varied and useful services excelled by no other one

* American Statesmen. Benjamin Franklin. By John T. Morse, Jr. Houghton, Mifflin & Co. $1.25.

man; and thus he has established a claim upon the gratitude of mankind so broad that history holds few who can be his rivals."