

JEWELS OF MASONIC ORATORY 1

A Plea For The Teachings Of Masonry

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M.:W.: Grand Master and Brethren of the M.:W.: Grand Lodge of Washington:

I share the general disappointment, that we are not to listen to-day, as was expected, to the gifted Grand Orator who delighted us last year; and I submit that, called upon on short notice to take the place of that accomplished officer, I am entitled to your indulgence, and should be excused for limiting my remarks to subjects which have particularly occupied my thoughts, instead of attempting the form of address more usual upon such occasions.

The subject I have chosen is expressed by the question "How can a knowledge of Masonry - that is, of the history, principles, teachings and purposes of our institution - be diffused among the brethren?"

I know this is a subject which seems to be regarded with profound indifference by many Masons; and I know how easy it is to acquire the reproach of being an enthusiast. But when I contemplate the long and honorable history of our fraternity, the incalculable benefits it has conferred upon the human race, and its incomparable moral and religious teachings, I feel willing to admit that the question, how to diffuse a knowledge of these things, is my chief thought by day, my dream by night; and when I see their value ignored or forgotten, or the Masonic duty of

imparting them to the initiate neglected, I am filled with the deepest concern. I am, at such times, lead to appreciate the feelings of a young friend of mine from Kentucky, on a certain occasion, and I beg to assure you, M.'.W.'. Grand Master, that there is no politics in this anecdote I am about to relate. This young man was present at the organization of a mugwump club, formed to promote the reforms promised by one of the great political parties. He listened to speech after speech which eulogized the new democracy, the young democracy, the reform democracy, the coming democracy, but heard only apologies and sneers for the course of his party in the days of Calhoun, of Jackson and of Buchanan. At last he could contain himself no longer, but, springing to his feet, exclaimed: "Mr. President, I am astounded at the gentlemen's remarks. I know nothing of this new doctrine - these sneers at the past; but I do assure you, sir, that through all my waking hours, when I am not reading my bible, I am meditating on the glorious history of the democratic party."

Such is my enthusiasm for Freemasonry.

"For her my tears shall fall,
For her my prayers ascend,
To her my cares and toils be given,
Till toils and cares shall end."

It is idle to deny that deep and widespread ignorance prevails throughout the craft concerning almost everything Masonic except the ritual - the husk in which the corn of nourishment, or, if you prefer, the casket in which the precious jewels of the craft are enclosed. What proportion of the members of our Lodges could tell, for instance, within two centuries, the age of our oldest records? How many Masters have never read a line of the old Charges of a Freemason, appointed "to be read at the making of new brethren?" How many Masonic dignitaries know the symbolic significance of the cable-tow, or dream that it has any connection

with that conversation in which the Man of Nazareth exclaimed to Nicodemus, "Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things?" [1] Nay, what Mason in Washington will tell me the symbolic teaching of the forty-seventh problem of Euclid?

Some of the results of this decay of knowledge are too plain and too painful to dwell upon, but too pregnant with ill omen to be ignored. Interest in the craft flags; half of our members become non-affiliates, or cease to attend Lodge; young men are entered, passed and raised, and suppose they have learned all there is in Masonry, when they have heard the prescribed lectures; for one who has mastered the ritual, there is supposed to be ne plus ultra; the earnest seeker after light is disappointed and discouraged; our fraternity is compared with modern beneficial societies which have sprung up around us; or, worse than all, the Lodge and the three degrees of Masonry are regarded as mere stepping-stones, or entrance porches, to modern rites or orders which are laxly called "Masonic." Who of us does not annually see men, eager to deck their feverish brows with a red-and-white or black-and-white feather, rush through the three degrees with the haste of a Fellow Craft seeking a passage into Ethiopia, and with the indifference of Pilate when he asked, but waited not for an answer to that profoundest of Masonic questions, "What is truth?" And who of us, Masters and Wardens, is not to blame that such a condition of affairs exists?

The causes of this state of affairs are too numerous to be specified now; and are important only in so far as a knowledge of them suggests a remedy. Perhaps the trouble began as soon after 1723 as a Master was able to excuse himself for not properly instructing an initiate, by saying, "Explanations of all these" points may be found in ye book printed by Brother Anderson, "with which it is hoped you will soon make yourself familiar." Much was due also to the wrong direction in which inquiring minds were diverted by the charlatans who over-ran Europe in the last century and, to

make a market for their side degrees, taught that "the Master's degree is incomplete," and that they, alone, possessed the "true word," and the genuine "secrets of a Master Mason." Their astounding success was due to an utter misapprehension of the very nature of our institution, and to ignorance of the finest allegory in Masonry, the sublime idea of the "Lost Word." The fiction that the Master's degree is incomplete is a vile abortion, begotten by deceit on the body of ignorance. No Mason who understands that "Masonry is a search for that which was lost," and appreciates the force of that finest of definitions, will expect ever to hear "the true word" from mortal tongue; for the word we seek is the Word which "was in the beginning with God;" the Word by which "the heavens were of old, and the earth standing out of the water and in the water;" and "the heavens and the earth which are now, by the same Word are kept in store." [2] Our search for a perfect knowledge of God and truth - the Alpha and Omega of Masonry - must continue through all time, perhaps throughout eternity. Here we know in part and we prophesy in part, and see through a glass, darkly; but not till this mortal shall have put on immortality shall we fully comprehend that Word, which to know aright is life everlasting.

Later causes which contributed to the neglect of Masonic learning, especially in the new states, were the absorbing anxiety to find that golden fleece of the nineteenth century, the mythical "pure Webb-Preston work," and to secure "uniformity" throughout our Lodges. The latter, not unimportant, object not only absorbed the funds and energies of young Grand Lodges having large territorial jurisdiction, but led to legislation which seems to discourage, if it does not prohibit, any instruction, while conferring degrees, beyond that contained in the prescribed work and lectures. In many foreign jurisdictions, as you know, no such restrictions prevail; but the Master is free, provided the essentials be not varied, to adapt his language to the intellectual capacity of

the candidate, or the exigencies of the occasion.

But I am not complaining of this legislation. No man recognizes more distinctly than I the importance, nay, the necessity, that every Mason know and hand down to his successors the exact esoteric work which came down to him from the fathers; and, doubtless, the danger that the personal ideas and conceits of individuals might be indistinguishably mingled with the teachings of Masonry, renders some ironclad rule necessary, so far as concerns the esoteric work. But this forces us, either to leave the new brother untaught, or to seek other times and opportunities to impart the instruction which he might expect to receive when the degrees are conferred. Is it not too true, and too evident, that he usually remains uninstructed? From all over America comes the testimony that when there are no degrees to confer, Lodge nights are well nigh wasted. In our own jurisdiction, by a rough estimate, it appears that during the last year 500 or 600 meetings were held at which nothing was done; or, multiplying this number by the average membership of our Lodges, about 30,000 opportunities of receiving Masonic light were lost. As a result Masonic darkness and all the attendant evils of which I have spoken prevail in many quarters, and bode no good for the future of the craft.

How are these evils to be remedied? How is Masonry to be taught?

Many plans have been tried. In 1802 Schroeder, in Germany, devised a plan by which, without recognizing any degrees beyond the third, a society might be annexed to any Lodge, to which competent brethren might be admitted, and in which they might study, digest and render available for the Lodges, whatever Masonic truth is taught in any of the so-called high degrees. These societies, called the Engbund, or the Divisions of the Master's Degree, have a simple form of initiation, and two grades not recognized as degrees. They still flourish in some German

grand jurisdictions, and the Grand Lodge of Holland, which has at last emerged from the "toy soldier" phase of its existence and reverted to pure Masonry, recognizes their value and importance. Probably nothing of the kind is available here; but this plan is suggestive of the fact that brethren who are Master Masons indeed should, like bees to the hive, bring to what some style Blue Lodges, all they glean concerning Masonry in any field. Omitting, of course, as worthless anything which we find in Chapter, in Commandery, in Council, or in Consistory, which is inconsistent with craft Masonry, if any such thing there be; omitting, as foreign to the royal art, all matters of mere chivalry; omitting modern inventions, and the vagaries of individual teachers, we who belong to any of those societies should bring to our Masonic home all that we learn in them which pertains to the symbols or teachings of the Lodge; for, as Albert Pike observed, "Degrees, if worthy to be called such, are only vehicles for instruction." [3] And we should never forget that, as the Masonic Lodges - Grand in particular - to which our first allegiance is due, claim and have supreme and exclusive jurisdiction over the whole corpus of pure ancient Masonry, while other bodies of Masons may use, they can acquire, as against the Lodges, no title to anything which the Grand Lodge rightly recognizes as a part of the body of Masonry.

Another plan for teaching Masonry was attempted by that earnest student whom I have just quoted; and, although he declared that it ended in failure, it may be reverted to as confirming the view I have just expressed. It may surprise some present to know that the great rite, to which Albert Pike devoted a third of a century, was to him but an instrument, not an end. But- he himself tells us, "I very seriously doubted, thirty two years ago, whether the ordinary Masonry had in it the essential requisites for perpetuity. * * * It was in the hope of doing something to give it vitality and save it from decrepitude and dotage, decay and decadence, by endeavoring through the degrees of a higher branch of it, to

elevate the Blue or Symbolic Masonry, that I engaged in the work which has chiefly occupied me during these thirty-two years; and now I see that, so far as the Blue Masonry is concerned, I have effected nothing." [4]

He saw that while he had aimed to establish a school in which the wisest and most earnest Masons would pursue a graduate curriculum of Masonic study, few of his disciples sought to learn what he had to teach; that many of those who did, doubted his conclusions; that the great majority cared little for anything but the outward marks of distinction; and, worst of all, that thousands of profanes who had never been first prepared in their hearts, attracted by tinsel and titles, became identified with our fraternity. From this experiment perhaps we may draw the conclusion that, though we may build up societies great and valuable in themselves, they can render craft Masonry little service if they lead even the thoughtless to suppose that any badge of distinction exists among men more honorable than the lamb-skin apron.

I think the most important step ever taken towards the diffusion of Masonic knowledge was the founding in London, in 1884, of the Lodge Quatuor Coronati. That Lodge, which numbers among its members such men as Gould, Hughan, Speth, Rylands and Lane, and in its correspondence circles most of the leading Masonic students in the world, devotes itself exclusively to Masonic study. It is no exaggeration to say that its publications, and those of its members, are of more Masonic value than all else that has been printed in English for a century.

While it is not possible for us to form such a Lodge, even in our larger cities, we may enjoy the results of their labors; for, at a cost of 10s 6d (\$2.56) per annum, any Lodge or Mason may join their Correspondence Circle and receive copies of their invaluable "Transactions," and there is not a Lodge, or a Masonic student, in

this jurisdiction who can afford to neglect doing so.

The work of that Lodge is general in its character; but other associations have been formed, less ambitious in aim, and quite capable of imitation by us in all our larger cities. For example, the Wakefield Masonic Literary Society, formed in Yorkshire, England, in 1889, declares its aim to be, "to take Masonry out of its ruddy and dry routine of the formal ritualism of the various degrees; to stimulate a desire to enquire into the history, archeology, and essence of Masonry, and to solve or explain the many anachronisms and difficulties which are constantly presenting themselves to the minds of thoughtful Masonic students and searchers after light and truth ;" [5] to enable Worshipful Masters "to get out of the crabbed and narrow text books, which are the bane of Masonry," and qualify them to perform "their bounden duty" of satisfying the minds of those who enter our Lodges expecting to obtain knowledge and intellectual development.

But it is within our Lodges that the most effective work can be done; and to the live Worshipful Master who wants to begin practical work, I would make two suggestions: First, start a Masonic library in your Lodge. Do not wait for the "mossbacks" to approve, or stop to conciliate the chronic grumbler, but persuade the brethren to buy a few books. You can make a fair start even with \$25. For about \$50, you can secure books (17 volumes), which perhaps the best living authority [6] has prescribed as constituting a "Masonic curriculum" for the student who wishes to put himself abreast of the Masonic knowledge of the day. Then a few volumes added annually will make Masonic ignorance, in your Lodge, no longer a necessary evil, but a willful offense.

Next, restore the social element in your Lodge, and have no more meetings at which "nothing was done." Do this by having some kind of Masonic instruction, with music, if possible, and a bite to

eat, at every meeting which is not occupied by work. Of course, you will stir up opposition. Brethren will denounce you as "a violator of the landmarks." Masons will declare that you have no right to use Lodge funds to buy refreshments. But let not ignorance dismay you. Let them appeal to the Grand Lodge, if they refuse to be enlightened otherwise, and we will pile up Masonic precedents for you higher than the M. .W. .Grand Master's head; for most of the Lodges in Europe, and hundreds in America, usually have a banquet at every regular meeting. But let Masonic instruction be the chief purpose of these meetings. Let Masonic problems be discussed by appointed brethren. Let well informed Masons, educated or uneducated, deliver written or oral addresses on any Masonic subject; or, when such addresses cannot be secured, let something be read from a Masonic book. The old "Charges of a Freemason," or an extract from Preston or Hutchinson, will be new to many, and interesting to all. It will surprise you what interest will be taken in these meetings. They are but a return to the ancient practice. Masonry was taught by symbols, because these appeal to the eye, and Masons will always respond if you appeal to their senses, especially to seeing, hearing or tasting. You cannot make a horse drink, and, perhaps, you cannot make the majority of men or Masons read. But universal experience shows that they will listen. Every Mason has an attentive ear. Supply the instructive tongue, and you will find them quick and eager to learn. We have tried this during the last year in the Lodge to which I have the pleasure of belonging, and its success is so great, and its benefits so marked, that I do not hesitate to say that were I to be Master during the next year (as I shall not be), I should make it a feature second in prominence not even to degree work. Interest is awakened, knowledge of the deep meaning of our mystery is imparted, appreciation of the design of our institution is engendered, Masonic light is diffused, Lodge meetings become attractive, and dormant members

awaken and join in our labors.

I have offered these disconnected but, I hope, practical suggestions, because I conceive an American Grand Lodge, in its generation, to be a practical body, met for the purpose of considering the needs of the Craft, rather than to listen to fine rhetoric or word painting; and because I believe we ought, as did our ancient brethren, to do something more for newly made Masons than to turn them loose with hardly a hint of the deep meaning, true value and real purposes of our mysteries.

"Universal benevolence, brotherly love and truth, acting by the square and living within compass," are indeed most vital tenets of Masonry; but they are not the limits of our duty. These include persevering, and passing to our successors unimpaired, a knowledge of the sublime teachings and symbolism which are our heritage from time immemorial, and which give our beloved institution a value infinitely above that of all other organized bodies.

Let us be ever faithful to this high and sacred trust, that we may merit the blessing of T.G. A. O. T. U., and be worthy to be addressed as

"Sons of light,

Who, in your fair abodes of peace and truth,

With allegory deep and symbols old,

Set forth, in rites mysterious, all that man

May know, learn, fear or hope."

NOTES

1 *Ars Quatuor Coronatorum*, III, 111. ↩

- 2 2 Pet. III. [↩](#)
- 3 Letter, Pike to R. F. Gould, May 7, 1889, *Ars Quatuor Coronatorum*, IV, 135. [↩](#)
- 4 Pike to Gould, June 19, 1889, *Ars Quatuor Coronatorum*, IV, 136. [↩](#)
- 5 *Ars Quatuor Coronatorum*, V. 235. [↩](#)
- 6 G.W. Speth, in *Ars Quatuor Coronatorum*, III, 116. [↩](#)

An Oration By Hon. William H. Upton, Acting Grand Orator, Delivered Before The M.W. Grand Lodge Of Washington, June 14, 1893.