

What is Freemasonry?

by W. Bro. George William Speth, 25 March 1893

De Quincey, in his Essay upon Secret Societies, tells the following tale.

" I once heard a poor fellow complain that, being a Freemason, he had been led the life of a dog by his wife, as if he were Samson and she were Dalilah, with the purpose of forcing him to betray the Masonic secret and sign : and these, he solemnly protested to us all, he had betrayed most faithfully and regularly whenever he happened to be drunk. But what did he get for his goodness? All the return he ever had for the kindness of this invariable treachery was a word, too common, I regret to say, in female lips-viz., fiddle-de-dee ! And he declared, with tears in his eyes, that peace for him was out of the question until he could find out some plausible falsehood that might prove more satisfactory to his wife's mind than the truth."

Many people have many ideas as to Freemasonry, and as these are generally all wrong, let me begin by shortly stating what Masonry is not; after which we will consider what it is.

WHAT FREEMASONRY IS NOT.

Many think the Society is a huge Benefit Society, like the Foresters, Odd Fellows, Druids, Antediluvian Buffaloes, and others, only frequented by men of a somewhat higher social status. In these societies a member pays certain fees or dues, and is legally entitled to claim in return certain benefits of a pecuniary nature. Freemasonry is emphatically not a benefit society; no Mason can claim as his right, in return for the heavy initiation fees, yearly subscriptions, and constant contributions to the Charities, any return whatever. And yet, our Charities are the finest and most prominent in the world; our Boys' School educates and clothes 250 orphans; our Girls' School effects the same purpose for 250 of the other sex; the Asylum provides for and grants annuities to some 400 old Masons, and their widows; and the Board of Benevolence disburses monthly about £1200, in sums ranging from £5 to £200. As a rule the Masons of England voluntarily subscribe and dispense for all these purposes something like £70,000 or £80,000 per annum. Beside these central Charities, almost every province maintains its own local Masonic charities. But I wish you to understand that no Mason has any claim upon these benefits; and if he enter our Society, being in ill-health, in the hope that the Craft will support his children, he may possibly find himself mistaken. The large sums which he yearly expends with us would be better invested in a life insurance, or in one of those benefit societies which are spread throughout the land. The Charities with us are the accident of the Craft, an outgrowth which was not originally contemplated, and are not, as with a benefit Society, the chief reason of its existence. A candidate joins Freemasonry, not for what he can get out of it, but to render himself more generally useful to others.

Freemasonry is in no sense a political Society. Men of the most opposite political views may be found seated together in any Lodge in the country. And yet I am by no means sure that the Craft does not exert a very deepseated and far-reaching political influence. The constant association, at Lodge and banquet, of men of all classes and views, on a footing of perfect equality, each thus learning to appreciate the good points of every other, tends to awaken an enlightened liberalism. Whilst, on the other hand, our own high antiquity as a Society, and the respect for old customs unconsciously inspired by our venerable ceremonies, produce a marked tone of conservative thought, and a dislike to change for change-sake. The absence of bitterness which so distinguishes our English politics, and the glorious, steadfast and persistent, though tentative and deliberate march of English Reform, reluctant to forget, but willing to learn, have probably not a little to the spirit of English Freemasonry inculcated in our Lodges.

Freemasonry is not a religion; it admits men of all religions. The Deputy District Grand Master of Burma lately wrote to me from Rangoon:

"I have just initiated Mounng (i.e. Mr.) Ban Ohm, a Burman, who has so far modified his religious belief as to acknowledge the existence of a personal God. The W.M. was a Parsi, one Warden a Hindu, or Brahmin, the other an English Christian, and the Deacon a Mohammedan."

But Freemasonry, although teaching no religion of its own, is the hand-maid of all religions, and calculated to make every member a more sincere follower of the particular religion he professes. The candidate must be a believer in God. With his initiation commences his Masonic instruction, and he is taught that this God is all-father, all-creator, omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent, absolutely pure and good, of impartial justice and inexhaustible loving-kindness, the giver of all gifts, the preserver from all evil. He is also taught that there is a life to come, in which he will meet with punishment or reward, according to his deserts. Any further dogma we leave to the teachers of the Churches ; we assert none, we controvert none.

This explanation of our tenets will also dispose of another accusation: that we are infidels and atheists. We are neither one nor the other, although the Pope stoutly affirms we are both. But then, he knows nothing about it himself, and like De Quincey's friend's wife, he will not believe those who do. In India the natives call the Lodge the Sheitan Bungalow, which means the Devil's House; they evidently share the opinion of the Pope.

Again, we are not a trades-organisation, as our name would imply, and yet we are the direct lineal descendants of the grandest corporation of artisans which ever existed: those glorious Free-masons who built all our old Cathedrals, Churches, Palaces, and Castles.

But perhaps no accusation was ever more persistently launched against us than that we are a mere convivial Society, a dining-club, eating and drinking more than is good for us, and the accusation is of very ancient date. Hogarth, himself a Mason, in his print of "London by Night," shows us two drunken Freemasons reeling home. In 1723 a funny little book appeared, entitled, "EBRIETATIS ENCOMIUM, or THE PRAISE OF DRUNKENNESS," in which the author attempts to show that it is a laudable and wholesome custom to get drunk occasionally in good Society, on good liquor, as confirmed by the example of Popes, Bishops, Philosophers, Free-Masons, and other "Men of learning in all ages." On another page he announces Freemasons and other learned Men, who, having wearied themselves with important Studies, have taken to this Diversion, shall also appear on the Stage. And he keeps his promise, for Chapter XV. is devoted to Freemasons and other learned Men who used to get "drunk," and he then goes on to say :

"I do assure my readers they are very great friends to the vintners . . . An eye witness of this was I myself at their late general meeting at Stationers' Hall . . . We had a good dinner, and, to their eternal honour, the brotherhood laid about them very valiantly. They saw then their high dignity: they saw what they were, acted accordingly, and showed themselves men. The Westphalia hams and chickens, with good plum pudding, not forgetting the delicious salmon, were plentifully sacrificed, with copious libations of wine for the consolation of the brotherhood . . . The bottle in the meanwhile went merrily about, and the healths were begun by a great man . . . which were unanimously pledged in bumpers, attended with loud huzzas. The faces then of the most ancient and most honourable fraternity of Freemasons, brightened with ruddy fires; their eyes illuminated, resplendant blazed. Well fare ye, merry hearts, thought I, hail ye illustrious toppers ; if liberty and freedom, ye free mortals, is your essential difference, it richly distinguishes you from all others, and is, indeed, the very soul and spirit of your brotherhood . . . I know not who may be your Alma Mater, but undoubtedly Bacchus your Liber Pater. "Tis wine, ye Masons, makes you free, "Bacchus the father is of Liberty."

I might multiply such good-humoured extracts from old books, and viler accusations spitefully made by more Modern writers, and I do not care to deny that, 150 years ago, Freemasons probably did occasionally dine "not wisely but too well," and if so, they did no more than everyone else was doing at that period. But how do we stand now? Most Lodges dine but once a year, at other times content themselves with a biscuit and a glass of wine. A Mason pays from 5 to 10 guineas for initiation, and from 2 to 6 guineas yearly subscription. If he joins for the sake of the one good dinner in the year, he certainly pays very highly for it. A dining club could be worked more cheaply, and, moreover, moderation in all things is a cardinal virtue with us, and intemperance a Masonic sin, and Masons now dine both well and wisely. And why should they not? It is all very well for a man with a torpid liver, an impaired digestion, a bilious temperament, or, worst of all, an empty purse, to sneer at a good dinner, but for my part I am not ashamed to stand here before you all and confess that I like it. Ninety-nine out of a hundred of us like a good dinner, and so do the Masons. I never refuse a good dinner on principle. I do not know how long my health or my means will permit me to enjoy one. But the dinners are not the soul of Masonry, and the proof is that the majority of Lodges dine but once a year. And if the Margate Masons dine well once a year, remember they like their poorer neighbours to do so also, and every winter provide a splendid dinner, tea, and entertainment for some 250 old men and women, residents in the town. That wine is no necessity to our proceedings is demonstrated by the fact that there are many teetotal lodges where no wine is allowed, and in every lodge will be found some total abstainers. Depend upon it, dinner is a grand institution; most of us like one a day. Whether it be good or bad is a question of degree, not of principle, and I prefer it good, when I can get it.

And now, I come to the most astonishing negation of all. FREEMASONRY IS NOT A SECRET SOCIETY. The Pope says it is, and nearly every Pope from Clement XII. in 1737 onwards has therefore excommunicated us. But I hope to show you that his Holiness is wrong again. Secret societies are of two kinds: those whose members remain unknown, and those who conceal their purpose and aims, their means of action, and the time and place of their meetings. The greatest secret society on earth is the society of the Jesuits. A large majority of their members are not known even to each other, and their actions are often not known to the Pope, but only to their General who holds all the threads in his own hands. I wish to throw no stone at them. Masonry has taught none to hope for righteous intentions everywhere; I am merely stating a well-known truth. It therefore ill becomes the Pope in one and the same breath to curse the Craft and to bless the followers of Ignatius Loyola.

Now, the Freemasons answer to none of the requirements of a secret society. They are known to their neighbours,—you never heard of a Freemason concealing the fact of his membership ; and every lodge, once a year, sends to the Clerk of the Peace a complete and full list of its members, Their aims and objects are no secret; you shall hear what these are presently. Their principles have been printed over and over again, and their doors are never closed to a properly qualified candidate. How can they be a secret society? Does the head of the detective force suspect them of meditating crime? He has only to apply for admission, become a Mason, and satisfy himself. Does the Government surmise treason in the lodge? Let the Prime Minister come and see. Does the Archbishop of Canterbury imagine we are undermining the Establishment? Or the Pope fear we are combating the Doctrine of Infallibility? Or the Mayor fancy we are unsound on the drainage question? Let them all come, they will be welcome. His Grace, his Holiness, his Worship, may make themselves equally free of our mysteries, provided they are good men and true. They will simply learn that, whatever our private opinions, we never bother our heads about such matters in lodge.

No ! Masonry is no secret society, but it possesses secrets of its own, which is quite another thing. Secrets ! Ay,—there's the rub ! What are these secrets? That is what everyone wants to know, especially the ladies. In Ireland, last century, Miss St. Leger afterwards the Honourable Mrs. Aldworth, wanted to know, and hid herself in the clock-case, so it is said, of the lodge room in her brother's house. But she was discovered, and had to undergo the ordeal of being made a Freemason before they would let her go, and a very good Mason she remained to the end of her life. Think of that, ye ladies of enterprise ! What an example to follow! But we are more careful now-a-days, and you would surely be discovered in time before the commencement of the ceremonies. When the Prince of Wales was installed Grand Master at the Albert Hall, I remember that two of the barmaids hid themselves on the glass roof — but the stewards hunted them out, and politely conducted them off the premises, a full hour before Grand Lodge assembled. They also wanted to know,

but were disappointed. Mrs. Caudle wanted to know, but that brute of a Caudle went to sleep, or pretended to, and would not tell her. De Quincey's friend's wife wanted to know, and would not believe the truth when she heard it. Now, I, personally, am the soul of candour, but even I am not going to tell you, and I trust you will not be too much disappointed. Our secrets are our own, and will remain so to the end of the chapter; but I will tell you this much. If you knew them they would be of no use whatever to you, though of great service to us. If our secrets could be of the slightest benefit to mankind in general, we should have made them public long ago.

WHAT IS FREEMASONRY?

It is a society of men of all classes in the social scale, of all nations, races, colours, and creeds. They must be believers in one sole, personal God. Further, of good position, ie., following some reputable calling. A usurer, a police-informer, the follower of any degrading occupation, even though perfectly legal, such as a hangman, would be an impossible candidate, because his presence would dishonour the Craft, and he would be unfit to associate with gentlemen. They must be of adequate means: that is, their income must be in excess of their actual necessities. Freemasonry is always more or less expensive, and we hold it a Masonic crime to devote to the Craft what is required by one's family. They must be of good repute or morals. This does not imply that every candidate shall be absolutely faultless, but what is known of him must be, on the whole, to his credit. The man of business whose smartness borders on dishonesty; the boon companion whose conviviality resolves itself into frequent excess; the man who is often seen in doubtful company; the hot-headed disputant whose violence of temperament leads him to forget the respect due to his adversary; these are not desirable members of the Craft, even though their good qualities exceed their bad ones. And yet, if carelessly admitted, there is a likelihood that the Craft and its lessons may do their great good. On the other hand, the inveterate liar, the unclean liver, the drunkard, the rowdy, the companion of rogues and vagabonds, the fraudulent bankrupt, the gambler, the spendthrift, the betrayer of innocence, the hypocrite and the niggard, are under no circumstances fit and proper candidates for the privileges of Freemasonry. They must be Free. When Masonry was first established, serfs and villains existed in the land. Such were not admitted to apprenticeship in our lodges. In like manner we must not admit a man who is not master of his own time and actions. But we apply the restriction to his intellect also. A man bound down in the chains of superstition, unable to take a free and manly view of matters in general, the bondsman of priestcraft, of social laws and prejudices, of his business avocations even, or a slave to his own passions, is not an associate for Free men and Masons. They must be sound men. When Masonry was chiefly composed of operative Masons, a cripple was not admitted to apprenticeship; the reason is obvious. We no longer insist upon soundness of limb, provided the candidate can fulfil our requirements; but we stipulate for mental soundness. A Mason must have a sound mind, capable of reasoning, of instruction, of appreciating the beauties of our ritual, of expressing himself clearly, of discriminating between good and evil, the noble and the base. They must be educated men. This does not imply a university career, or even a board-school education. The best and truest and most serviceable education is often acquired amongst one's fellow men in the battle of life. That they must be able to read and write is obvious. But they must have been educated to possess the most valuable attributes of a gentleman. Not in the restricted and false sense in which My Lord Tomnoddy would apply the word. Polished manners and a good tailor neither make nor mar the gentleman. Masons understand by the term a man who has learnt to be considerate to all men, of a kind and chivalrous nature, who avoids acts and words which pain his neighbours, honest in thought and deed, the support of the weak, the vindicator of the oppressed. Such a man, though his hands be horny, his boots clumsy, his gait heavy and his H's misplaced, is a noble man, a friend to be trusted, and will make a good Mason. If in addition he possesses the grace and accomplishments of Lord Chesterfield, or the erudition of Bacon, he will be doubly welcome; but the latter qualities, without the former, are as naught. They must be of a charitable disposition. Charitable in giving of their superabundance, charitable in sympathy with the distressed in body and mind, charitable in thinking no evil of friend or foe. To virtue ever kind, to faults a little blind. Such should be the member of the Craft; this is the ideal which every lodge should strive to attain. That in many cases we fall lamentably short of this high ideal, must be attributed to the imperfections of our human nature.

WHY DO WE MEET?

We meet for the purpose of admitting new members to our fellowship, to instruct them in the lessons and principles to which I have already alluded, and to strengthen each other in adherence thereto. We meet to hand down to succeeding generations the knowledge and practice of certain ceremonies which we ourselves have inherited from our Masonic ancestors, and the analogues of which can be traced in the remotest antiquity, back to the very dawn of Egyptian civilisation. These ceremonies typify great and immortal fundamental truths, and inculcate the teachings to which I have already called your attention. I do not claim that we alone are in possession of these truths: they are now common property, though they were not so always — all religions teach them more or less, and they are nowhere better exemplified than in the Christian religion. But I do assert that we are the only institution on earth which elucidates them in this particular manner, and that we have done so for ages past. Why this should be so, is one of the unsolved problems which attract the attention of archaeologists and antiquaries. Lastly, we meet to practice our three Grand Principles of "Brotherly Love, Relief, and Truth." The two first have been already explained, they are included in Charity. Truth signifies an unswerving honesty of thought and deed, towards ourselves, our neighbours, and our God. We are also taught to strive towards the attainment of the perfect, the absolute Truth, i.e., the perfect understanding of all things human and divine. To know our God, thoroughly, perfectly, intimately, would be the acquisition of all truth; but this is impossible on this side of the grave, and so Masonry teaches us. Nevertheless, by faith and perseverance, we may continuously approach nearer and nearer to the truth, and such is the duty enjoined upon us in a Freemasons' Lodge.

WHENCE CAME FREEMASONRY ?

Freemasonry may be looked at in two lights: as a corporation and as a peculiar cult. In its first aspect its origin is fairly demonstrable,

in the other it is involved in mystery. Its physical development can be traced with sufficient accuracy, its ethical evolution is a great puzzle. Let us attack the physical or corporate side first. When our Saxon ancestors settled in England, they brought with them their own common law. Every man was a free-man, and their chiefs were popularly elected, not hereditary. For civil purposes the land was divided into tithings, a district supposed to be enough for the support of ten families, and ten tithings made a hundred. Our maps still attest this. Each tithing had its own court, and was responsible to the rest of the nation for the conduct of its own members. Here we see the principle of association which is so ingrained in our race. Very shortly after-wards arose, beside these communities, others of a voluntary description, called guilds. We find them mentioned in the laws of Ina in the 7th century, and the "Dooms" of Athelstan in the 10th. England is the birth-place of the guilds, and the earliest were the Frith or Peace Gilds. Membership was not restricted to residence, neither was it compulsory as in the tithings. The primary object was the security, in person and property, of its members. There were fixed subscriptions, oaths of fealty, mutual insurance against fire and theft, monthly meetings terminating in a repast, bestowal of alms, pensions to decayed members, masses for the dead, usually the support of a proprietary altar in some church, burial allowances, and a sub division of the members into tens and hundreds, clearly indicating their origin. About the time of the Conquest, Merchant Guilds appear : their name sufficiently denotes their character. They pursued the same objects and even insured their members against piracy and shipwreck. Many of these merchant Guilds in time came to own fleets of their own, both trading and military ; they also formed the governing powers of the large trading cities, and on the Continent were generally known as the Patrician Guilds. Soon after the Conquest we meet with Trades Guilds : the artisan had at last learned to combine for his own interests. Their objects and methods were very similar. The support of an altar for their own especial use, the regulation of their trade, the control of competition, the insurance of good workmanship, the punishment of conduct either bad in itself or offensive to the guild, the preservation of trade secrets, mutual support and assistance, pensions and burial allowances, and the hindering of those who dared to practice the trade without having served a proper apprenticeship to one of its members, and joined the fellowship, Masons called these "cowans," as Freemasons still do ; modern unionists call them "blacklegs." In the cities these Trade Guilds soon forced from the Merchant Guilds an acknowledgement of their equality, and obtained an equal share in the municipal government. Hence such corporations as that of the City of London : the City Companies, are the lineal descendants of these old guilds. Many other guilds were established, such as Church Guilds, Military and Knightly Guilds, but with these we have no concern. At the time of the Reformation it is computed that there were 34,000 different guilds in England, but Henry VIII. swept them almost all ruthlessly away, under the plea that they were bodies for superstitious observances. Some were saved by wealth or accident, and many Trades Guilds were especially excepted. However, they also declined in importance and utility, until now none remain in the true sense, the Companies in London and some other cities being no longer connected with the trades of the same names. For practical purposes they are replaced by the trade unions and masters' associations. Among these guilds were the Masons-guilds in all cities; the present Company of Masons in London is the survival of such a guild. If the Freemasons' Lodges were the direct descendants of these guilds, my task would be done, but we are only indirectly connected with them, and more directly with a society or fraternity of Masons which existed side by side with them, and whose genes is somewhat of a mystery.

Very early we find indications in history of a subdivision in the Masons' Craft. In 1376 a list was drawn up for the City of London Council. The Masons furnished four representatives, the Freemasons two. The next year the two companies seem to have fused into one, and sent up six, and the London Company took the title of Freemasons. But in 1653 the London Company once more called itself Masons only, and shortly afterwards we know of the existence of a "Society of Freemasons of the city of London," quite distinct from them. But during all the middle ages we have evidence of the existence of bodies of Masons unconnected with the City Companies, and a distinction seems to be involved between Freemasons and Masons. In the Fabric Rolls of York Minster as early as 1355, we have mention of the Master and Wardens of the Masons, and of their lodge. At St. Alban's we meet them under a latin designation in 1200 and 1321. In one word it may be said that wherever there were cathedrals or churches being built, there we meet with Masons, usually styled Freemasons. The probability is, that the London Freemasons of 1376 were church builders, using the gothic style, and that the ordinary City Masons were simply house and wall builders, who required no great knowledge of the higher attributes of the art. Beyond this distinction of skill, there seem to have been other differences. A Guild-mason was resident in a municipality, and worked there in virtue of his guild and borough freedom. The freedom of the city was necessary : a York Mason would not be allowed to work in London, for instance, unless he joined the London Guild and took up the London freedom. Not so with the Freemason lodges. The Freemason worked in a lodge (the name is mentioned as early as 1200) and once admitted a member, he was welcome to work in any lodge in the country. If no work was available, he was helped to the next lodge. So that one Mason-guild did not acknowledge the rights of another Mason-guild; but one lodge recognised every other, and the validity of the membership once conferred. The Craft even then had about it some of the universality which is still its boast.

The word lodge is never connected with the City Masons, only with the Freemasons. It was originally the common workshop erected near the church in progress, and the first work of the Freemasons was always to build the lodge before they started on the church. It was also the place of common recreation and meals; it was always kept closed, and apprentices were sworn to preserve the secrets of the lodge. The word ultimately acquired a more extended signification, till it came to mean not only the meeting place of the society, but the society itself.

Each Mason-guild framed its own laws, but they were not necessarily all identical. The Freemasons had but one code of laws for the whole country, and each lodge possessed a copy. The earliest copy of these laws known to us dated from about 1390, and the documents all state that the laws were granted and a charter confirmed by Athelstan about A.D. 926. Whether this be true or tradition only, it is not possible to decide, but there appears no ground for doubting it; and certainly we may presume the existence of written copies of these laws as early as the thirteenth century. To these laws was prefixed a traditionary account of the origin and rise of the Craft, extending back to before the Flood, and coming down to the time of Athelstan. The Company or Guild-masons have preserved no traditionary history : no other trade in England or elsewhere can produce a similar document. The Freemasons from the very first evidently had secrets, a Mason's-word, grips, &c., features totally lacking with the Guild-masons or any other trade. All these facts go

to prove that, though in exceptional cases, as in London, the two societies may have fused, yet they were two distinct bodies. Whether one originally sprang from the other or not is difficult to say. It constitutes a puzzle, interesting not only to Freemasons, and to architects, but to antiquaries of every kind.

As long as church-building on a large scale continued, these fraternities of Freemasons were apparently attached to every Cathedral, formed as it were a part of the staff. But first came the Wars of the Roses and architecture languished, only to revive for a time under the earlier Tudors. Then came the Reformation and church-building practically ceased, and Masonry would appear to have almost died out. The lodges managed to preserve their existence however, for we next meet with them in a somewhat altered condition of development. Many facts go to prove that they were still the same bodies; their name, the possession of the same code of laws and legends, their recognition by the lodges which had remained purely operative, and a sprinkling of working Freemasons in all of them. But the generality were composed in large part of gentlemen and others unconnected with the building-trade: and many of them had ceased to concern themselves with the building operations of the times. The change must have been the gradual work of the 15th and 16th centuries, but we have no record of the circumstances which brought it about. Gentlemen probably formed part of the lodges from the earliest times, manuscripts of the 14th century seem to vouch for this; but how the preponderance of gentlemen arose, is not accounted for as yet. In Scotland we see the same process, except that many more of the old lodges there retained an active interest in building, but lodge minutes of the 16th century already show us in that country noblemen and gentlemen members of the fraternity, and the proportion grew larger year by year. Perhaps the best description I can give of the state of the Craft in the 17th century is the following, taken from Dr. Plot's Natural History of Staffordshire, published in 1686:

"To these add the customs relating to the County, whereof they have one of admitting men into the Society of Freemasons, . . . though I find the custom spread more or less all over the Nation : for here I found persons of the most eminent quality that did not disdain to be of the Fellowship. Nor indeed need they, were it of the antiquity and honour that is pretended in a large parchment volume they have amongst them, containing the history and rules of the Craft of Masonry. Which is there deduced not only from Sacred Writ, but profane story, particularly that it was brought into England by St. Amphibal, and first communicated to St. Alban, who set down the charges of Masonry, and was made paymaster and governor of the King's work, and gave them charges and manners as St. Amphibal had taught him, which were after confirmed by King Athelstane, whose youngest son Edwyn loved well Masonry, took upon him the charges, and learned the manners, and obtained for them of his Father, a Free-charter. Whereupon he caused them to assemble at York, and to bring all the old books of their Craft, and out of them ordained such Charges and Manners as they thought fit : which Charges in the said Schrole or Parchment Volum, are in part declared : and thus was the Craft of Masonry grounded and confirmed in England. It is also there declared that these Charges and Manners were after perused and approved by King Henry VI. and his Council, both as to 'Masters and fellows of this right worshipful Craft.

"Into which Society when any are admitted, they call a meeting (or Lodge, as they term it in some places), which must consist of at least 5 or 6 of the Ancients of the Order, whom the candidates present with gloves, and so likewise to their wives, and entertain with a collation according to the custom of the place : this ended, they proceed to the admission of them, which chiefly consists in the communication of certain secret signs, whereby they are known to one another all over the Nation, by which means they have maintenance whither ever they travel : for if any man appear, though altogether unknown, that can show any of these signes of a Fellow of the Society, whom they otherwise call an accepted Mason, he is obliged presently to come to him, from what company or place soever he be in, nay, tho' from the top of a Steeple (what hazard or inconvenience soever be run), to know his pleasure, and assist him : viz : if he want work he is bound to find him some; or if he cannot do that, to give him money, or otherwise support him till work can be had : which is one of their articles : and it is another, that they advise the Masters they work for, according to the best of their skill, acquainting them with the goodness or badness of their materials : and if they be anyway out in the contrivance of their buildings, modestly to rectify them in it: that Masonry be not dishonoured: and many such like that are commonly known: but some others they have (to which they are sworn after their fashion), that none know but themselves, which I have reasons to suspect are much worse than these."

The official written history of the society only dates from 1717, previous to which we must glean what we can where we can, but the foregoing extract from Dr. Plot will readily be recognised by any Mason here present as a fairly accurate description of our Society, and not very different from to-day. We have indications of the existence of some of these lodges which so attracted Plot's attention. The antiquary, Elias Ashmole, thus writes in his diary, under date 16 October, 1646 :

"I was made a Free Mason at Warrington in Lancashire, with Coll: Henry Mainwaring of Karincham in Cheshire. The names of those that were then of the Lodge, Mr. Rich. Penkett Warden, Mr. James Collier, Mr. Rich. Sankey, Henry Littler, John Ellam, Rich: Ellam & Hugh Brewer."

These names have all been identified a few years ago, with the result that not one of them was a working stonemason. A copy of the laws previously referred to exists in the British Museum (Harleian MSS., NO. 2054). It is written by Randle Holme of Chester, the third of five of that name, all of whom were gentlemen and heralds ; the date is about 1665. On the back is a list of lodge members, including Randle Holme himself. Out of the 26 names 18 have been identified, and only four of these were working stonemasons. In his " Academie of Armory," he draws a distinction between Masons and Freemasons. "I cannot but honour the Fellowship of the Masons because of its Antiquity: and the more, as being a member of the Society, called Freemasons.

In March, 1682, Ashmole records in his diary:

10. - About 5 p.m., I recd a Summons to appr at a Lodge to be held next day, at Masons Hall, London."

11.- Accordingly I went, & about Noone were admitted into the Fellowship of Freemasons,

Sir William Wilson, Knight, Capt. Rich: Borthwick, Mr. Will: Woodman, 'Mr. Wm. Grey, Mr. Samuel Taylor & Mr. William Wyse.

I was the Senior Fellow amongst them (it being 35 yeares since I was admitted), There were present beside myselfe the Fellowes after named. Mr. Tho: Wise Mr of the Masons Company this prsent yeare "[& eight others whom I need not name.] Wee all dynd at the halfe Moone Taverne in Cheapside, at a Noble dinner prepared at the charge of the New-accepted Masons."

From the place of meeting being Masons Hall, it might be inferred this was a meeting of the Company or Guild, more especially as out of the 16 persons named 10 belonged to the City Company, but the other six never did ; and out of the six candidates for initiation two were already members of the City Company. Besides, in the extract, Ashmole, who never belonged to the Company, draws a distinction between the Masons Company and the Fraternity of Freemasons.

In the very same year we find the distinction again drawn very sharply. I have several times referred to our Code of Laws, or Roll of the Charges. Such a roll is in the possession of the Lodge of Antiquity, London, the oldest lodge in the country. It is signed, "William Bray, Freeman of London and Freemason. Written by Robert Padgett, Clarke to the Worshipful Society of the Freemasons of the City of London, ... 1686." Padgett was not the Clerk to the Masons' Company, to which neither he nor Bray ever belonged. Therefore the Society and the Company must have been distinct entities. Aubrey, in his "Natural History of Wiltshire," speaks of the Fraternity of Freemasons, and in an additional note written in 1691, on the back of Folio 72, uses the same term. In 1693 we have palpable evidence of a long pre-existing lodge at York; and in 1705, Sir George Tempest, Bart., was the Master, and all the members practically were gentlemen. In 1701 there was a lodge at Alnwick. The members appear to have been exclusively stonemasons, and they never joined the Grand Lodge of England, or the new system, at all ; whilst so late as 1763 they still remained essentially a trades lodge. Yet they possessed the same laws and a scroll of the Charges, and called themselves the Fellowship and Company of Freemasons." A petitioner for relief in 1732, informed Grand Lodge that the Duke of Richmond had made him a Mason at Chichester in 1696. In 1705 a scroll of the Charges was endorsed to this effect, that at a private lodge held at Scarborough before William Thompson, President, and other Freemasons, six persons, who sign below, were "admitted to the Fraternity." These and other proofs I could give, all show that the Masons' lodges existed in great numbers, that they were independent of the Guilds, that they were usually called "Fraternity," or "Society," that some were composed solely of workmen, others of gentlemen, and others of both combined. But, as I said before, although they were evidently the successors of the church-building lodges of Freemasons, how these arose in the first instance, and why they gradually developed into the bodies we meet at a later time, are questions of the utmost difficulty.

We are now arrived at that point where written history renders our task easy. In 1716 four of these lodges existed in London : they were the lodges which met at

"The Goose and Gridiron alehouse," in St. Paul's, Churchyard.

"The Crown alehouse," in Parker Lane, near Drury Lane.

"The Apple Tree tavern," in Charles St., Covent Garden.

"The Rummer & Grapes tavern," in Channel Row, Westminster.

They met and resolved to form a Grand Lodge or Central Authority, and choose a Grand Master. This resolution was carried out on the 24th June, 1717, when Mr. Antony Sayer, Gentleman, was elected Grand Master. He was followed in 1718 by George Payne, Esq., in 1719 by Dr. John Theophilus Desaguliers, in 1720 by Payne again, and in 1721 by John, Duke of Montague. From that date the Grand Lodge has always had at its head either a nobleman or a prince of the blood. New lodges were formed and warranted, pre-existing ones joined the new organisation, and the society rapidly increased in strength and importance. In 1729 the Irish lodges established the Grand Lodge of Ireland and in 1736 Scotland followed suit. Meanwhile, in 1725, the old lodge at York, of which I have already spoken, assumed the titles and functions of a Grand Lodge, but there was no rivalry between it and London. During a rather fitful career it established some few lodges of its own, but they and their mother lodge all died out before the close of the century.

More important was a schism which occurred in 1751, which resulted in six lodges establishing a rival Grand Lodge in London. The new comers styled themselves "Ancient" Masons, and thus forced on the original Grand Lodge the perfectly erroneous designation of "Moderns." But in 1813, the 388 lodges of the older organisation, and the 260 of the newer, with their respective Grand Lodges, combined to form the present "United Grand Lodge of the Free and Accepted Masons" of England, which now numbers over 2000 lodges in all parts of the world.

Quite early after the formation of the Grand Lodge, and the greatly increased prosperity of the institution, foreigners were admitted members, and, returning to their own homes, formed lodges there under the Grand Lodge of England. The same thing occurred in the Colonies. In course of time, foreign countries and some of our Colonies erected Grand Lodges of their own, independent of England, but still pursuing the same spirit; still governed by the same fundamental laws ; and thus arose the great Fraternity which now covers the face of the earth, all sprung from this little island home, and from the action of our London lodges in 1716-17.

It may be of interest to know how our Royal Family has stood in relation to the Craft. The first of our Royal line to join us, at least in modern times, was Frederick Lewis, Prince of Wales, son of George II. and father of George III., 5 Nov., 1737. His brother, William Augustus, Duke of Cumberland, was initiated in 1743. George III. was not a Mason; but of his brothers, Edward Augustus, Duke of York, was made in 1765; Henry, Duke of Cumberland, in 1767; and William, Duke of Gloucester, in 1766. All of these were granted the rank of Past Grand Master, and the Duke of Cumberland was actually Grand Master from 1782 to 1790. The son of the Duke of Gloucester, and therefore a nephew of George III., was initiated in 1795. The eldest son of George III., George, Prince of Wales, afterwards George IV., was made a Mason in 1787. He succeeded the Duke of Cumberland, his uncle, as G.M. in 1790, and retained the office until he was appointed Regent in 1813. Of his brothers, Frederick, Duke of York, was made in 1787; William, Duke of Clarence, in 1786; Edward, Duke of Kent, in 1790 (he was the father of our Queen); and Augustus, Duke of Sussex, in 1798. These two were respectively Grand Masters of the two rival Grand Lodges at the date of the "Union." Another brother of George IV., Ernest, Duke of Cumberland, was initiated in 1796, and in 1828 became Grand Master of Hanover, of which country he became king in 1837. His son, George V., of Hanover, Duke of Cumberland, was initiated in 1857, and was also Grand Master of Hanover. Albert Edward Prince of Wales, our present Grand Master, was initiated in 1868, and became Grand Master in 1875. His brothers the Duke of Connaught and the lamented Duke of Albany were made in 1875: and his son, whom, we have so recently lost, Albert Victor, Duke of Clarence and Avondale, in 1885. The Queen, who is Grand Patroness of the Craft, therefore counts among her immediate family the following Masons:- her father, five uncles, two cousins, three great-uncles, her great grandfather, a great-great-uncle, three sons and one grandson. To enumerate the foreign princes and emperors who have joined our ranks would take too much time. I once wrote a little book, giving short Masonic sketches of them all, (as I then thought), but although I enumerated upwards of 170, I have since made the acquaintance of many whom I had inadvertently omitted.

WHENCE CAME OUR SYMBOLISM?

The only question now to place before you is that of the origin of our ceremonial and symbolism. On this topic it would be possible to argue from now to Christmas and yet not exhaust the subject but I shall make it the shortest section of my lecture firstly, because to deal with it at any length would weary you, and secondly, because my duty as a Mason forbids my speaking openly except in lodge. I have already told you that we have peculiar ceremonies and a special symbolism. They are very remarkable; no society on earth is known to possess anything at all like them. We can trace them backwards to a time antedating the formation of Grand Lodges, thus proving that they were a heritage from the old working Freemasons. But at that time Freemasonry had long been decaying, and it is not logical to suppose that such a highly ornate and complicated system arose at a period of stagnation. Rather, should we seek for its birth at the spring-tide of Masonry, the 13th and 14th centuries, if not earlier still. Even then it must have been peculiarly the property of the Masons lodges, for the descendants of the ordinary Masons' have no knowledge of anything similar. I do not wish to assert that our ceremonial is word for word and point for point the same as at that date: this would be foolish, for all things in this world change, although I verily believe Freemasonry does so less than anything else. But the essentials of our system and its underlying philosophy must have been there in the 14th century or earlier. Whence came they? They could hardly have been self evolved, for we meet with systems startlingly analogous in the ancient mysteries of Egypt, Assyria, Greece, and Rome. Are we a survival and the only survival of these? Possibly, even probably, but the connecting links are at present missing. There are many possible links, suggestion is easy. We might instance a possible influence of the Roman Collegia, the Templars, the Magistri Comacini, the Gnostics, the Culdees. Links between the remotest antiquity, the farthest East and ourselves may be easily conceived, all are more or less probable, but in every case we are stopped by the want of absolute evidence. No answer to the question is at present possible: we are striving to discover the truth, and day by day some new fact crops up, some spark of light appears to raise our expectations, and alas! as often flickers for a time and dies out. For the present we are groping in the dark. Freemasonry, to the thoughtful Mason, is as much a mystery in one sense, as in another it is to the outside public who are not Masons. The mere antiquity of a society can be no just cause for its continuous existence, and I am anxious to show why Freemasonry still possesses a valid right, not only to live on, but to spread and fill the whole earth, as it assuredly will.

WHAT IS THE VALUE OF MASONRY AT THIS TIME?

In the first place, it interests a vast number of men of different temperaments for various reasons. You all know how enthusiastic Masons are. To busy men it is a welcome relaxation. After the worry and heat of the day, whether spent in the study, or business, or in the field, or in political controversy, they enter the lodge and instantly find themselves enveloped in an atmosphere of peace. No current from the outside world ruffles the perfect harmony of that sacred asylum; no whisper of religious difference, of business cares, or carping, envy, disturbs the profound peace of brotherly love. Though foe meet foe, at least for a few hours they are brothers; they may continue rivals but will probably never be enemies more. The beautiful words of our ritual fall as healing balm on the wounded spirit, the soul is elevated above the cankerous cares of the world, and our brother returns to his home, refreshed and comforted, and fitter to re-commence the inevitable struggle of the morrow. Good fellowship and noble thoughts have strengthened him for his daily toil. Surely such a haven of peace and comfort is worth preserving. Others never weary of its old-world but sound philosophy; to them the well-known ritual is ever new, and they go forth more and more resolved to carry out its holy precepts. Others find pleasure in the never ceasing of doing good, and to them the Craft affords a welcome opportunity of exercising themselves in the greatest of all virtues, Charity. A society which evokes this spirit has a right to exist. And lastly, there is a class of members, curious and prying, to whom the Craft is one of the greatest enigmas of the day, and who devote their leisure to studying it under every aspect, seeking to wrench from its closed lips the secret of its origin, and the meaning, imperfectly understood, of its symbols.

It will be conceded that an institution which satisfies so many minds has a right to exist: but I will put it higher, and attempt to show that it would be a calamity to the world should it decay. I have shown its use to individuals, and will only detain you further while I explain its utility to, the Community, the State, and to, Humanity at large. To the Community. It is useless shutting our eyes to the fact

that society is divided into different social strata, which seldom find the opportunity, by intimate intercourse, of learning to appreciate each other. But the lodge provides the opportunity. There all classes meet upon a footing of perfect equality, the only superiority being that of Masonic rank, with the result that the commoner often takes precedence of the duke, and, even in military lodges, the sergeant of his colonel. In the lodge all classes mix, and learn to know and respect each other : the whole fabric of local society is inextricably interwoven, and the great doctrine of fraternity and equality are practically exemplified. No greater boon can be granted to a town than such a society, nothing more conducive to the harmony of the community could be devised. To the State. Political rivalry easily degenerates into personal animosity : set class against class, and sooner or later, civil war ensues. But, bring the two parties together, convert bitter opponents into generous rivals, provide a common ground on which all can meet in loving kindness, and bitterness will cease. Teach each class to know and respect the other: then your revolutions will be reforms; your smouldering discontent will no longer blaze out into bloody revolt, but will, like a little leaven, leaven the mass : your possible rebels will become political leaders, and your opposing sects fellow workers. This is the mission the Craft performs in the State, and it is a blessed one. To Humanity at large. If the influence of Freemasonry be good to the individual, the community and the state, you have but to spread its influence abroad to benefit humanity. But the greatest boon conferred by the Craft on humanity is its insistence on the holy doctrine of individual liberty. I have now mentioned Liberty, Equality and Fraternity, the motto of the ghastly French Revolution. It is also the motto of Freemasonry. The thought underlying the Revolution of 100 years ago was a noble one, but it led to revolting, barbarous, sacrilegious excess. It was suddenly dangled before the eyes of a people unfitted by previous experience for self-government, and like a sharp tool in the hands of a child, did more harm than good. Instead of a blessing it proved a curse, carrying death and suffering, murder and outrage, war and famine over the greater portion of Europe. The motto is a good one none the less, but you must read it Masonically. As regards fraternity, I do not think we interpret it differently from the French. We understand thereby that God being our Father all men are brothers. So says the Church also, but if Christianity preach this to the Mohamedans, will it stay the next jihad, or holy war ? Will it be listened to ? Masonry can and does preach it to all men, and obtains a hearing and ready acquiescence. Equality we understand far differently to the French. I think that even in England public opinion misunderstands Masonic Equality. The French thought their nobles all too tall to mix with common mortals, so they shortened them by a head. They levelled down; we levelled up. If a nobleman enter our lodges, we have no wish to deny him his worldly distinction or titles, we deprive him of nothing. But we do teach our humbler members that in the sight of God and of their brethren they are his equals ; that intrinsically their worth equals his, or that it only depends upon them to make it so ; whilst in the eyes of the Craft, they may by good Masonic service and the suffrage of their fellows, become his superior. We freely acknowledge inherited, acquired, or conferred dignity, but we hold it in slight esteem compared to native worth. We assume that a nobleman by becoming one of us shares these sentiments, and anyway we insist upon his acting up to the assumption, at least while in lodge. But the greatest boon we hold out to humanity is liberty—liberty, mark well, not license. Liberty to think our own thoughts, to believe our own creeds, to regulate our own lives; liberty to dissent, if we see fit, from the weight of authority; liberty to be men, not slaves. Liberty to think, speak, act as we please, provided we offend not our brother. It is this perfect freedom which is the charm of our society ; this it is which enables the Christian, Jew, Mohammedan, Parsi, Hindu, each to honour T.G.A.O.T.U. after his own fashion, side by side in the same chamber; this it is which is rubbing off the sharp corners of humanity, and making of the world one family. The work is not yet finished, we are but a little way on our road, but we are ever steadily pressing on to the goal. We English first won our own liberty, personal by Magna Charta, spiritual by the Reformation, and we have sent out Freemasonry, as a missionary into all lands to preach the sacred doctrine to all men. And until the Millennium come, this mission of the Craft shall endure. So mote it be.