

Sunday Masonic Paper No. 819
Reflection on the EA Degree

Nothing in Freemasonry is more beautiful in form or more eloquent in meaning than the First Degree. Its simplicity and dignity, its blend of solemnity and surprise, as well as its beauty of moral truth, mark it as a little masterpiece. Nowhere may one hope to find nobler appeal to the native nobilities of as man. What we get out of Freemasonry, as of anything else depends upon our capacity, and our response to its appeal; but it is hard to see how any man can receive the First Degree and pass out of the lodge room quite the same man as when he entered it.

What memories come back to us when we think of the time when we took our first step in Freemasonry? We had been lead, perhaps, by the sly remarks of friends to expect some kind of horseplay, or the riding of a goat; but how different it was in reality. Instead of mere play-acting we discovered, by contrast, a ritual of religious faith and moral law, an allegory of life and a parable of those truths which lie at the foundations of manhood. Surely no man can ever forget that hour when, vaguely or clearly, the profound meaning of Freemasonry began slowly to unfold before his mind.

The whole meaning of initiation, of course, is an analogy of the birth, awakening and growth of the soul; its discovery of the purpose of life and the nature of the world in which it is to be lived. The lodge is the world as it was thought to be in the olden times, with its square surface and canopy of sky, its dark North and its radiant East; its centre an Altar of obligation and prayer. The initiation, by the same token, is our advent from the darkness of prenatal gloom into the light of moral truth and spiritual faith, out of lonely isolation into a network of fellowships and relationships, out of a merely physical into a human and moral order. The cable tow, by which we may be detained or removed should we be unworthy or unwilling to advance, is like the cord which joins a child to its mother at birth. Nor is it removed until, by the act of assuming the obligations and fellowships of the moral life, a new, unseen tie is spun and woven in the heart, uniting us, henceforth, by an invisible bond, to the service of our race in its moral effort to build a world of fraternal good will.

Such is the system of moral philosophy set forth in symbols in which the initiate is introduced, and in this light each emblem, each incident, should be interpreted. Thus Freemasonry gives a man at a time when it is most needed, if he be young, a Nobel, wise, time-tried principle by which to read the meaning of the world and his duty in it. No man may hope to see it all at once, or once for all, and it is open to question whether any man lives long enough to think it through - for, like all simple things, it is deep and wonderful. In the actuality of the symbolism a man in the first degree of Freemasonry, as in the last, accepts the human situation, enters a new environment, with a new body of motive and experience. In short, he assumes his real vocation in the world and vows to live by the highest standard of values.

Like every other incident of initiation, it is in the light of the larger meanings of Freemasonry that we must interpret the Rite of Destitution. At a certain point in his progress every man is asked for a token of a certain kind, to be laid up in the archives of the lodge as a memorial of his initiation. If he is "duly and truly prepared", he finds himself unable to grant the request. Then, in one swift and searching moment, he realizes - perhaps for the first time in his life - what it means for a man to be actually destitute. For one impressive instant, in which many emotions mingle, he is made to feel the bewilderment, if not the humiliation, which besets one who is deprived of the physical necessities of life upon which, far more than we have been wont to admit, both the moral and social order depend. Then, by a surprise as sudden as before, and in a manner never to be forgotten, the lesson of the Golden Rule is taught - the duty of a man to his fellow in dire need. It is not left to the imagination, since the initiate is actually put into the place of the man who asks his aid, making his duty more real and vivid.

At first sight it may seem to some that the lesson is marred by the limitations and qualifications which follow; but that is only seeming. Freemasons are under all the obligations of humanity, the most primary of which is to succor their fellow man in desperate plight. As Mohammed long ago said, the end of the world has come when man will not help man. But we are under special obligations to our brethren of the Craft, as much by the prompting of our hearts as by the vows we have taken. Such a principle, so far from being narrow and selfish, has the endorsement of the Apostle Paul in his exhortations to the earl Christian community. In the Epistle to the Ephesians we read: "As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith." It is only another way of saying that "Charity begins at home," and for Masons the home is the lodge.

So, then, the destitute to which this Rite refers, and whose distress the initiate is under vows to relieve, as his ability may permit, are a definite and specific class. They are not to be confused with those who are poverty-stricken by those that are of criminal tendencies or inherent laziness. That is another problem, in the solution of which Masons will have their share and do their part - a very dark problem, too, which asks for both patience and wisdom. No, the needy which this Rite requires that we aid are "All Poor and Distressed, Worthy Masons, their Widows and Orphans;" that is, those who are destitute through no fault of their own, but as the result of untoward circumstances. They are those who, through accident, disease or disaster, have become unable, however willing and eager, to meet their obligations. Such are deserving of charity in its true Masonic sense, not only in the form of financial relief, but also in the form of companionship, sympathy and love. If we are bidden to be on our guard against impostors, who would use Masonry for their own ends, where there is real need, our duty is limited only by our ability to help, without injury to those nearest to us.

A church, it be worthy of the name, opens its doors to all kinds and conditions of folks, rich and poor alike, the learned and unlearned. But a lodge of Masons is different, alike in purpose and function. It is made up of picked men, selected from among many, and united for unique ends. No man ought to be allowed to enter the Order unless he is equal to its demands, financially as mentally and morally, able to pay its fees and dues, and to do his part in its work of relief. Yet no set of men, however intelligent and strong, are exempt from the vicissitudes and tragedies of life. Take, for example, Anthony Sayer, the first Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of England. Towards the end of his life he met with such reverses that he became tiler of Old Kings Arms Lodge No. 28, and it is recorded that he was assisted "out of the box of this Society." Such a misfortune or something worse, may overtake any one of us, without warning or resource.

Disasters of the most appalling kind befall men every day, leaving them broken and helpless. How often have we seen a noble and able man suddenly smitten down in mid life, stripped not only of his savings but of his power to earn, as the result of some blow no mortal wit could avert. There he lies, shunted out of active life when most needed and most able and willing to serve. Life may any day turn Ruffian and strike one of us such a blow, disaster following fat and following faster, until we are at its mercy. It is to such experiences that the Rite of Destitution has reference, pledging us to aid as individuals and as lodges; and we have a right to be proud that our Craft does not fail in the doing of good. It is rich in benevolence, and it knows how to hide its labors under the cover of secrecy, using its privacy to shield itself and those whom it aids.

Yet we are very apt, especially in large lodges, or in the crowded solitude of great cities, to lose the personal touch, and let our charity fall to the level of a cold distant almsgiving. When this is so charity becomes a mere perfunctory obligation, and a lodge has been known to vote ten dollars for its own entertainment! There is a Russian story in which a poor man asked aid of another as poor as himself: "Brother, I have no money to give you, but let me give you my hand," was the reply. "Yes, give me your hand, for that, also, is a gift more needed than all others," said the first; and the two forlorn men clasped hands in a common need and pathos. There was more real charity in that scene than in many a munificent donation made from a sense of duty or pride.

Indeed, we have so long linked charity with the giving of money that the word has well nigh lost its real meaning. In his sublime hymn in praise of charity, in the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians, St. Paul does not mention money at all, except to say "and although I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing." Which implies that a man may give all the money he possesses and yet fail of that Divine grace of Charity. Money has its place and value, but it is not everything, much less the sum of our duty, and there are many things it cannot do. A great editor sent the following greeting at the New Year: "Here is hoping that in the New Year there will be nothing the matter with you that money cannot cure. For the rest, the law and the prophets contain no word of better rule for the health of the soul than the adjuration: Hope thou a little, fear not at all, and love as much as you can."

Surely it was a good and wise wish, if we think of it, because the things which money cannot cure are the ills of the spirit, the sickness of the heart, and the dreary, dull pain of waiting for those who return no more. There are hungers which gold cannot satisfy, and blinding bereavements from which it offers no shelter. There are times when a hand laid upon the shoulder, "in a friendly sort of way," is worth more than all the money on earth. Many a young man fails, or makes a bad mistake, for lack of a brotherly hand which might have held him up, or guided him into a wiser way.

The Rite of Destitution! Yes, indeed; but a man may have all the money he needs, and yet be destitute of faith, of hope, of courage; and it is our duty to share our faith and courage with him. To fulfill the obligations of this Rite we must give not simply our money, but ourselves, as Lowell taught in "The Vision of Sir Launfal," writing in the name of a Great Brother, who, though he had neither home nor money, did more good to humanity than all of us put together - and who still haunts us like the dream of a Man we want to be.

"The Holy Supper is kept indeed,
In what so we share with another's need;
Not that which we give, but what we share,
For the gift without the giver is bare;
Who bestows himself with his alms feeds three,
Himself, his hungering neighbour, and Me!"