

BROTHERS AND BUILDERS

THE BASIS AND SPIRIT OF FREEMASONRY

THE FOUNDATION

By Dr. Joseph Fort Newton.

I

The basis of Freemasonry is a Faith which can neither be demonstrated nor argued down - Faith in God the wise Master-Builder by whose grace we live, and whose will we must learn and obey. Upon this basis Masonry builds, digging deep into the realities of life, using great and simple symbols to enshrine a Truth too vast for words, seeking to exalt men, to purify and refine their lives, to ennoble their hopes; in short to build men and then make them Brothers and Builders.

There is no need - nay, it were idle - to argue in behalf of this profound and simple Faith, because any view of life which is of value is never maintained, much less secured, by debate. For though God, which is the name we give to the mystery and meaning of life, may be revealed in experience He cannot be uttered, and in a conflict of words we easily lose and sense of the unutterable God, the Make of Heaven and earth and all that in them is, before whom silence is wisdom and wonder becomes worship. It is enough to appeal to the natural and uncorrupted sense of humanity, its right reason, its moral intuition, its spiritual instinct. Long before logic was born man, looking out over the rivers, the hills and the far horizon, and into the still depths of the sky, knew that there was Something here before he was here; Something which will be here when he is gone.

Happily we are not confronted by a universe which mocks our intelligence and aspiration, and a system of things which is interpretable as far as we can go by our minds, must itself be the expression and embodiment of Mind. What is equally wonderful and awful, lending divinity to our dust, is that the Mind within and behind all the multicolored wonder of the world is akin to our own, since the world is both intelligible by and responsive to our thought - a mystery not an enigma. And, if one door yields to our inquiry, and another door opens at our knock, and another and another, it only requires a certain daring of spirit - that is, Faith - to believe that, if not yet by us, why, then, by those who come after us, or, mayhap, by ourselves in some state of being in which we shall no longer be restrained by the weaknesses of mortality, or befogged by the illusions of time, the mind of man shall find itself at home and unafraid in the universe of God, a son and citizen of a City that hath foundations.

II

What, now, precisely, does this profound faith mean to us here? Obviously, it means that we are here in the world to do something, to build something, to be something - not simply to pass the time or to wear out shoes - and what we do and build ought to express and perpetuate our personality, our character. There is one kind of immortality which we should earn in the world, by adding something of worth to the world, by so building ourselves into the order of things that whatever immortality this world may have, our life and labour shall share in it. Once, in the south of England, I heard a little poem which seemed to me to have in it a bit of final philosophy - not a great poem but telling a great truth:-

"The good Lord made the earth and sky,
The rivers and the sea, and me.
He made no roads; but here am I as happy as can be.
It's just as though He'd said to me,
'John, there's the job for thee.'"

The idea in the rhyme is that in a very real sense God has completed nothing; not because He has not the power or the will to do so, but out of a kind of respect for men, so to put it, offering us a share in His creative work. He makes no roads, He builds no houses. True, he provides us with the material; He supplies us with firm foundations - and models of every shape and beauty -

but the road and the house must be the work of man. Our good and wise poet, Edwin Markham, was right when he wrote:-

"We men of earth have here the stuff
Of Paradise - we have enough!
We need no other thing to build
The stairs into the Unfulfilled -
No other ivory for the doors -
No other marble for the floors -
No other cedar for the beam
And dome of man's immortal dream.
Here on the paths of everyday -
Here on the common human way -
Is all the busy gods would take
To build a heaven, to mould and make
New Edens. Ours the stuff sublime
To build Eternity in time. "

Not only are we here in the world to build something, but we are here to build upon the Will of God, in obedience to His purpose and design. The truth of a will within and behind everything is a truth which has far too little place in our lives; hence our impatience, our restlessness, and our sense of futility. Yet this truth of the Will of God as final has been the strength and solace of man in all his great days. The first fact of experience, if not the last truth of philosophy, is that the world has a mind of its own, which we call the will and purpose of God. Manifestly the only man who builds rightly is the man who builds with due regard for the laws, forces and conditions of the world in which he lives.

Not one of us would trust ourselves to a house which has been built casually and haphazard. We demand of a wall that it shall have been built with respect to the centre of gravity of this earth, and to the position of the polar star. Our work, if it is to be of any worth, must be in harmony with the nature of things; and this is equally true when we think of the House of the Spirit not built with hands, but which, none the less, we are set to build in the midst of the years. Here also we build wisely only when we build in harmony with the Will of

God as we believe and see it. All history enforces the truth that there is a Will, holy and inexorable, which in the end passes judgment upon our human undertakings. Men do not make laws; they discover them. Faith in God advises us, warns us, to regard the revelations of the moral, as well as the physical, Will of God, else our proudest fabric will totter to ruin.

Therefore we are here in the world to build upon the Will of God with the help of God, invoking His help in words of prayer and worship, but also in our efforts and acts of obedience, and proving ourselves worthy of that help, and retaining it, by keeping in the midst of it by humble fidelity. A wise man, especially a Freemason - if he knows his art - will rebuke himself and recall himself from any vagrant lapse or prolonged neglect, lest he go too far. Here is a matter which even the best of us to often forget. God no more wishes us to live without His aid than He wishes us to lie without air. He is the breath of our spirit. Truly has it been said that the final truth about man is not that way down in the depths he is alone; but that in the depths he is face to face with God.

Long ago it was said: "Except the Lord build the house they labour in vain that build it." What the Psalmist means is that the great things in the world are not accomplished by man, either by his anxieties or by his ingenuities. By these lower, lesser faculties - by cunning, by cleverness - we may achieve small and passing things. The truth is, rather, that the great things, the enduring things, are accomplished - not indeed, apart from us, and yet not wholly as the result of our efforts - by One wiser than ourselves by whom we are employed in the fulfilment of the design larger than we have planned and nobler than we have dreamed. Those of our race who have wrought the most beautiful and enduring works confess themselves to have been used by a Hand and a Will other than their own, as if caught up into the rhythm of "one vast life that moves and cannot die."

Here is no abstract and unreal platitude, but a truth, a fact, a source to which we may apply a daily test, and which we need to invoke if we are to face the difficulties and embarrassments - aye, the tragedies - of these our days and years. Even the strongest of us need such resource the better to confront the issues of the day, as well as to face the vaster problems and mysteries which lie on all the horizons of our life.

III

Such is the foundation of Freemasonry, and the faith by which it makes us builders upon the Will of God and by His help, and brothers one of another. Upon this foundation is erected an elaborate allegory of human life in all its varied aspects: the Lodge is a symbol of the world in which man lives, moves and goes forth to his labour; initiation our birth into a world in which we are to learn morality and charity; if counted worthy passing out of youth into manhood with its wider knowledge and heavier responsibilities; and finally, if we have integrity and courage, the discovery that we are citizens of Eternity in time: an ideal world ruled by love, wisdom, strength and beauty. It is a great day for a young man when Masonry reveals its meaning to him, unveiling its plan of life, its purpose, and its prophecy of a Temple of Brotherhood.

A great Freemason of Scotland, who recently climbed ahead to work up in the dome of the Temple. left us a legacy of inspiration and instruction in a book which is at once a mentor and a memorial: "Speculative Masonry," by A. S. MacBride, Lodge Progress, Glasgow. Even now it is a classic of our literature, a light to lead his Brethren toward the truth after he has vanished from among us. The book is wise rather than clever, beautiful rather than brilliant; but there is hardly a page that does not yield some insight to illumine, some epigram to haunt the mind. The beauty of the book is inwrought, not decorative; in the build of its thought even more than in the turn of its sentences, and still more in its spirit in which spiritual vision and practical wisdom are blended. There are passages of singular nobility, as witness this one of the Great Landmark:-

"Why is Masonry here, in this world of selfishness and strife? Wherefore has it been developed, amid war and incessant conflict, along the lines of peace and love; and so marvellously moulded and developed that in every land it is now known, and by every race made welcome? Has all this been done that it may live for itself alone? No, there, on its Trestleboard is the Plan of the Great Architect and its mission is to work out that plan. Out of the rough hard quarries of a quarrelling humanity it has to build a Temple of Brotherhood and Peace. This Temple is the Great Landmark - the highest and grandest ideal of Masonry. To build, strengthen and beautify it, we must bring in the aid of all the arts and sciences, apply every resource that civilization and progress can give us, and exercise all the powers and gifts with which we have been endowed.

"What nobler work can we be engaged in, Brethren? Yet, how far we are, as a rule, from understanding it. We seem to be groping in the dark. Yet it is ignorance more than unwillingness that hinders the work. Like the ingenious craftsman at the building of the Temple at Jerusalem, we appear to be without plan and instruction, while, in reality, our plan and instruction lie in the work itself. Then, like him, we shall some day have our reward, and will gratefully exclaim: *Thank God, I have marked well.*"

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