

**Grand Lodge  
Free & Accepted Masons  
Of California  
Grand Oration 1877**

**Grand Orator  
Aaron A. Sargent**

Having been called away to attend to his duties as a Senator of the United States at the extra session of Congress about to be held, the address which he had prepared would be read, at his request, by the Deputy Grand Master, Charles L. Wiggin

MOST WORSHIPFUL GRAND MASTER AND BRETHREN OF THE GRAND LODGE

Amid the exacting tasks of a laborious public position, it has been difficult for me to find time to discharge the duty imposed upon me by the Grand Lodge, and impossible to prepare an address entirely worthy of that Grand Body and this occasion. The few thoughts which I offer are a partial solution of the problem, interesting to me and to all of us, why Masonry, alone, of all voluntary societies, unaided, as it has ever been, by extrinsic power, and possessing no military or judicial force to execute its will or enlarge its empire, has preserved an efficient organization for ages, and has gradually extended its boundaries until it encircles the earth.

Masonry seems thus far to have been exempt from the decay that is the condition of all material existence, however enduring. The hills, which are types of the ever lasting, are perishable after their kind, as is the snowflake. "The glacier streams," says RUSKIN, "weary the mountain heart as the crimson pulse does ours." The natural force of the mountain crag is abated in its appointed time, like the strength of the sinews in human old age; and it is but the lapse of the longer years of decay which, in the sight of the Creator, distinguishes the mountain range from the moth and the worm. The shores of time are strewn with wrecked empires and the debris of creeds, associations, and enterprises. As the worn grains of sand continually roll to the ocean bed and leave monotonous levels where once were proud volcanic peaks, so dissolves into the abyss of time the strongest work of men's hands, whether fortress, temple, or dynasty. By what means, (I enquire), has Masonry escaped the operation of these great, depressing laws of change?

In a republic, where all forms of government and habits of society are based on freedom of thought, Masonry has its most fertile soil and luxuriant growth. But such surroundings are not calculated to give it toughness of fibre, or develop its fruit to the highest perfection. The original purpose of Masonry was to give to its votaries the very liberty of thought which time and progress have since granted to vast communities, but which was difficult to assert in the infancy of our society, because it was stamped out by the bigotry of an unenlightened age wherever it appeared. The essential distinction of Masonry for generations was that it was the opponent of tyranny and priestcraft, acting, it is true, by quiet processes, as the freezing raindrops cleave the rocks, but ever working out its mission for the emancipation of the human intellect and the vindication of private judgment against hoary and otherwise unchallenged despotisms. Any student of Masonic history knows that the Craft first adopted, and in secret taught and maintained, the truths of the Copernican system; and that it did so at a time when GALILEO, broken in heart and mind, stooping with the weight of seventy years, being brought before the Holy Inquisition, denied having written of the earth's motion in *malice prepense*, confessed to a vain ambition for the acquisition of knowledge, admitted his ignorance and in-advertence but claimed to be innocent of willful disobedience, and offered to add anything to his book to confute the theory of COPERNICUS—"that the sun is the center of the universe and immovable, and that the earth is not the center of the same, and that it moves."

Masonry was operative and speculative. Its speculations tended towards forbidden fields of thought and investigations. New theories could be denied by authority, investigation could be prohibited, and contumacy be punished by imprisonment or death. But, within the walls of the Lodge-room, guarded by zealous vigilance, the theory was not concluded by a denial emanating from ignorant authority, and the investigation proceeded. The persecution of the institution, which lasted for centuries, did not spring from its religious or anti-religious character. To speak

cautiously on this point, it may be admitted that, to bigotry, free inquiry savors of atheism, and so far persecutors of Masonry felt justified in those dark ages. But Masonry then had nothing in common with atheism, and has nothing now; and it has as little at any period been a partisan for or against any creed. It recognizes certain great truths which lie at the foundation of every real religion, but it wisely stops short of any discrimination between sects, and thereby makes its universality possible. Masonry was persecuted because it rebelled against the slavishness of those ages and sought to penetrate and dissipate mysteries which were under the protection of superstition.

This spirit of free inquiry commended Masonry to the advanced minds of that period, when to doubt was to be damned in both a temporal and a spiritual sense. The Lodge-room was the centre of activity of thought. The astronomer, the chemist, the geographer, the geologist, all who believed that science had not yet attained to all knowledge, and that divine revelation did not shut out inquiry into nature's secrets, met in secret and propounded their speculations to eager ears, or tested their theories by the crude appliances which infant art had furnished. Our ritual bears traces to this day of the nature of the studies of the old Masons and of the secrets which were then confided to faithful breasts, as any one may detect who listens to it, keeping this idea in mind." In the ages when the boundary between science and empiricism was scarcely marked, it was not strange that the astronomer, demonstrating to the brethren the true theory of the universe, the stationary sun, and the moving earth, should pause to show the influence of Mars upon the destiny of the man or monarch born while it led the starry host; or that the chemist, in revealing the secrets which he had really found in fecund nature, should declare that he had also nearly discovered the philosopher's stone, which could transmute all metals into gold, the elixir of life that should give perpetual health, or a universal solvent. Such ideas were the natural offspring of the contact of high speculative intellect, in a dark and enthusiastic age, with the wonders of science which are in all ages pregnant with mystery. The hardy voyager could tell truths of distant lands which were then as novel as fictions; and 'yet, like RALEIGH, speak believably of " men having eyes in their shoulders and mouths in the middle of their breasts "—

" The anthropophagi, and men whose heads  
Do grow beneath their shoulders."

If COPERNICUS was found in the Lodge-room, so was CAGLIOSTRO; if ROGER BACON and BASIL VALENTINE, so were ALBERTUS MAGNUS and PARACELUS. Light was struggling with darkness and doubt was shaking ancient reverences. The fiat had gone forth that all things should become new. Yet the newness was dreaded by Church and State, which bound men's bodies, minds, and hearts to the old order of ideas. Masonry inevitably soon became known as the forum of forbidden discussions, and was proscribed as the enemy of faith and loyalty. Hence came persecution unto death, the *auto da fe*, the rack, and all the ingenuity of torture, which made the secrecy of Masonry a necessary safeguard, and the Tyler at the door, with his drawn sword and traditional fidelity, no idle display. Men stealthily crept to the Lodge as if to the scene of an intended crime. A surprised meeting meant this lingering torture and hideous death. Such dangers may have appalled the coward, but they attracted the brave. Knowledge thus gained or shared was the forbidden fruit, which is sweet; and the intercourse of true hearts, thus secured, was the bread eaten in secret, which is pleasant. The Craft gained by the very means used for its repression, and its Lodges multiplied in all the cities of Europe where the new learning had votaries and free thought had lovers. If scientific inquiry had not been repressed and outlawed, Masonry would probably have perished in its infancy, as many merely social and beneficial societies have done; but its bold march was encouraged by the very agencies set at work for its destruction: and, while it benefited science by furnishing it the hospitality of the Lodge-room when all else was hostile and persecuting, science benefited Masonry by bringing to its membership the free, brave, intelligent minds of the age—men whose names adorn the scroll of the world's history, which, long after their death, recorded and praised their labors and discoveries. Another element of the ancient success of Masonry may be overlooked at the present day. The institution was founded upon the natural law that all men are equal. In this respect its teachings were revelations of a social philosophy most surprising in its early age, antedating by long centuries any declaration of that fundamental truth emanating from any

political body. Most attractive to men's minds—to men loaded down with the might of feudal burdens, to intelligent men, conscious of God-given capacities, though thwarted and circumscribed by the oppressive distinctions which kept humanity in immovable layers, was the declared truth of man's equality. No matter what the limitations which gave or refused men rank wealth, or position in the world, in the Lodge room they met, from the first, on a common level. It was the policy or principle of Masonry from its origin to disallow distinctions among men, and to condemn the false pride of caste; for Masonry has never regarded any man for his worldly wealth or honors. Hence, the liberal Prince, in pursuit of science, if he passed our portals, met the architect on the level of a common fraternity, assumed the same vows, and accepted the same truths. Generous souls among the great were not, and did not feel, degraded by their recognition of those truths, the influence of which was to raise in the scale of manhood (he generality of the Craft. The constant assertion of every man's equal right to stand on the level with those whose birth or power gave them preeminence in society was a leaven whose necessary work was to dissolve class prejudices and give truer and nobler conceptions of man's claims and obligations. Hence, Masonry has served as an educator in freedom and political justice in the past times, and still performs that office in despotism countries.

That work had also its attendant dangers. The jealousies which the society so long ago engendered, and the persecutions which assailed it in Europe, sprang partly from efforts to repress its tendency toward an order of things where no man should put his heel upon the neck of his fellow. And well might this be. Such an instrumentality not only emancipated the conscience but the person. It necessitated progress towards reform in the State and the overthrow of selfish privileges and class tyrannies. These, from their very nature, were opposed to it. On their side was power, the mailed hand of the warrior, the prejudiced sword of justice; and these were ruthlessly used. Antagonism more positive cannot be conceived than that between the theory of government then existing and the fundamental theory of Masonry. These were absolutely irreconcilable, and conflict was inevitable—waged on the one side with the ordinary weapons of vindictive and scandalized power, and on the other by skillful evasion or patient endurance. Yet Masonry survived the conflict and worked out its mission. Perhaps its persecutors did not fully estimate its tenacity of life, or understand the scope of its purposes or modes of action. To them it was a heretical and disloyal sect, despised while hated. In fact, it contained the most hopeful germ of the age, which slowly unfolded to beauty and usefulness. Governed by intellect, and not by coercion, the effect of Masonry upon ideas and manners has been, and is, gradual, and in any short period of time imperceptible. But who shall deny the steady influence of a society then pervading Europe, and now every part of the civilized world, keeping step with population, found alike in parent states and their distant colonies, ever teaching that men are brothers, equal in right and esteem before its altars and in the eye of Heaven, and conveying these truths, not under the sanction of fear or force, but as kindly suggestions and by appeals to reason. A little seed is deposited in the crevice of a cliff; it starts into feeble life; is watered by the rains and fanned by the breezes of heaven; as it grows into majestic proportions it makes itself room, cleaves the rock, and casts it from its ancient seat. The influence at work is silent, and, except by jealous despotism, unnoticed: but the force is irresistible.

Thus truth subdues error. Thus the principle of equality, fostered by Masonry, has overthrown old prejudices and tyrannies and flourished upon their ruins. It has been well said by DRAPER that "brute force holds communities together as an iron nail binds pieces of wood, by the compression it makes—a compression depending upon the force with which it has been hammered in. It also holds a little more tenaciously if a little rusted with age. But intelligence binds like a screw. The things it has to unite must be carefully adjusted to its thread. It must lie gently turned, not driven, and so retains the consenting parts firmly together." Privilege was the rusted nail driven into society, which held its discordant parts together. Masonry taught a better way. It was the screw that bound men in adjusted fraternity. The intelligent conception of man's relations which has distinguished the ritual of Masonry during these many ages, and which is known to have illuminated the Craft at a period otherwise as dark as Erebus, seems, as I have said, almost the fruit of a revelation—at least, the precocious perception of a noble natural law—and the principle which bound Masonry together necessarily disintegrated and destroyed opposing systems. Fraternity and equality must expel tyranny and caste or be ousted by them. The issue of

such a conflict, continued through the ages, is inevitable—" for ever the truth comes uppermost, and ever the right prevails." Masonry embodies and illustrates that spirit—

"—working in the world  
Like to a silent, subterranean tiff;  
Yet ever and anon some monarch hurled,  
Aghast and pale, attests its fearful ire;  
The dungeoned nations now once more respire  
The keen and stirring air of liberty."

The use of Masonry in this regard has been appreciated by patriots ever since its organization. Many of the heroes of our revolution were Masons, and the Lodge held at Valley Forge, in the darkest days of that struggle, is historical. The Italian patriots, who united Italy and seated VICTOR EMANUEL on a stable throne, were Masons, though stigmatized and misrepresented as *Carbonari* Masonry is peculiarly popular among the French Republicans, while it is under the ban of what is there called clericalism. It is everywhere the exponent of liberal ideas, with well-understood tendencies which attract the lovers of liberty and equality.

Masonry was a necessary redeeming agent for the age in which it originated. At no time in the world's history, known to civilized man, was some purifying power, outside of the law and existing organizations of state, church, or society, more needed. Referring to the era that probably gave birth to Masonry, though to illustrate another topic, a distinguished writer thus describes its characteristics: " Never did men live under such a crushing sense of degradation ; never did they look back with more regret; never were the vices that sprung out of despotism so rife; never was sensuality cultivated more methodically; never did poetry curdle so readily into satire; never was genius so much soured by cynicism ; and never was calumny so abundant, so gross, and so-easily believed." As a foul atmosphere engenders the lightning which purifies it, so that mean and foul age gave birth to Masonry, which was a protest against its meanness; and servility, and a corrective of its vices.

Following down the record of Masonry I find that another element of its growth is that it has never assumed to be a system of, or a substitute for, religion. It does not purport to be a guide to faith. It nowhere seeks to interfere between the creature and the Creator, or assumes to do more than inculcate reverence to the Supreme and faithfulness to man. Nowhere in Masonry is the idea taught or implied that the path to Heaven runs through the Lodge. We have never invaded the province of any sect or creed. The Hebrew who believes in the old dispensation, and the Christian who trusts in the new, alike kneel at our altars. It is a mistake of some well-disposed people to think that Masonry assumes to do more than prescribe the general moralities, without which any faith is dead. But to adopt any creed, to indulge in speculations upon articles of faith, would lead to controversy and disunion. Men's opinions cannot be cast in the same mould of religious belief, even by authority; else persecution would have stamped out dissent, which it has never done; or persuasion would have brought uniformity, which it has as little accomplished. Religious beliefs are compounded not only of reason but of emotions, temperaments, and dispositions. While moral truth is immutable, religious beliefs may vary with each generation. Many dogmas, revered of the past, excite the derision of the present. Into this domain Masonry, wisely, has never intruded. There is not a tenet which it taught in the fifteenth century that is not received in this age with reverence. The hot breath of ridicule has never attained it. It is not committed by a record of puerilities in the past to inevitable present contempt. All that is known of it excites respect and admiration. It has escaped the danger of the divisions which grow from polemical controversy because it has not assumed to dictate opinions, or possess them, on any subject within the reach of such controversy. It has always held whatever it has gained of members or influence, because there could be no schism from its teachings without denial of fundamental truths, which are the security of manhood, home, and society. By avoiding speculation or dogmatism on religious topics it has avoided inconsistency, passion, and disunion. Yet Masonry would have been a failure had it been liable to the charge of impiety. It is true that Masons have been ranked with infidels in persecuting fulminations; and, had the charge been true, the Craft would have had but a limited following, for the tendency of the human mind is

reverential. But its votaries knew the charge to be unjust, and clung the more strongly to it from the sense of the injustice.

Masonry has had vast growth because it inculcates a pure morality. No worthy Mason can be a dishonest or impure man. The first lesson which lie is taught is that truth is a divine attribute and the foundation of every virtue. He is instructed to put a due restraint upon his affections and passions; to preserve a noble and steady purpose of mind, equally distant from cowardice and rashness; to regulate his life by the dictates of reason; and to render to every man his just due, without distinction. In short, the three great duties of life are impressed upon his mind and conscience— reverence to God. the chief good; kindness to his neighbor, as prescribed by the golden rule; and respect for himself, by avoiding irregularities and intemperance, which impair the faculties and debase the dignity of his profession. While these are the familiar lessons of the Craft, it is not assumed that every Mason lives up to this standard. Human nature has not arrived to this state of perfection in many individuals. When religious sects shall have so far advanced in holiness that they need no longer to say, " when we would do good evil is present with us," then we will admit the justice of a criticism which requires of all our members a practical exemplification of all the virtues inculcated by Masonry. Any system of morality must be judged by its teachings and not alone by its teachers.

We claim' only for Masonry that its tendency is toward good; that it elevates the character of men and gives to them better conceptions of their duties and responsibilities before God and man; that the body of the Craft are better men than they would have been had they not been Masons; and that the world is more enlightened, purer, and freer for the institution. But the effect on the growth of that institution, produced by such teachings, arises from the ready assent of initiates which they command, and which strengthens with mature judgment and reflection after their advancement. No philosophical observer can doubt that there is a vast preponderance of good in the world, and an unfeigned admiration by the great majority of reasonable beings of that which is right and pure. While there is much of evil there is more of good. Men admire rectitude even if they do not possess it. Even vice pays a tribute to virtue in its hypocrisy. But the average man, as well as the highly gifted, has good intentions and loves truth; he recognizes it with pleasure and attaches himself gladly to its instrumentalities. Hence an element of the success of Masonry. It may be mentioned as an accessory, that the truths of Masonry are illustrated by symbols of felicitous taste and poetic beauty. Rich in expression, yet limpid in simplicity, these rare creations of gifted minds exert a strong influence alike on the imagination and the reason, and give vividness and reality to truths which constant repetition might otherwise render commonplace or monotonous.

The universality of Masonry has been favored by the same influences which have caused many secret societies to spring into existence, flourish awhile, and disappear. These " come like shadows, so depart." Many of them, both social and political, have been produced and have perished during the present generation. These ephemeral creations did not take a deep root in human nature, because they either sprang from superficial causes, were the exponents of a single idea, or were the product of transient, even if strong, sentiment. Men like mystery. They eagerly seek the unknown; but there must be intelligence and permanence of purpose to hold the neophyte who is attracted by curiosity and novelty. No matter how beautiful the symbol, his continued interest must be secured by something behind and superior to the symbol. Dramatic work may appeal to the imagination, but if the reason is left unsatisfied, all soon becomes stale, flat, and unprofitable. Masonry has combined its unsurpassed poetic imagery with philosophic wisdom and sagacity. It not only allures, it retains. While consistent, it is many-sided and meets the tastes of all orders of men, from the humble artisan to- the man of abstract science. It numbers in its ranks today, as it has done in all the term of its existence, the brightest and most progressive intellects of the age. Princes preside over its deliberations in Europe and feel honored by its honors; and the most eminent statesmen of this republic have ministered at its altars. It thus rests on sturdy foundations and is powerfully buttressed on every side. The fiercest persecutions have therefore failed to destroy it. The mark of ancient superstitious vengeance and modern political assault, it has survived unharmed. It can count its martyrs ruthlessly done to death by thousands; but its history may be almost vainly scanned for a traitor.

The conflict of ideas between Masonry and a prominent religious organization is a relic of the past, and is as inveterate as are all of that class of antagonisms which have a traditionary

basis. The excitements which are periodically worked up between the descendants of those who fought on opposite sides at the Boyne, excite the wonder of those who do not share the emotions of the actors therein. So we may marvel that time and demonstration have not allayed this antipathy to Masonry. The spirit of the age does not tolerate the forcible-modes of repression of ancient days. Undoubtedly the higher humanity which now pervades all government of Church and State, banishes the barbarous expedients of the past. But Masonry is still discountenanced. Roman Episcopal letters of late date have defined as dangerous and heretical the teaching of the Craft. By this authority the Lodge room yet conceals the mystery of iniquity. But the progress of science has justified the right of free inquiry claimed and exercised by Masons, and has taught the world that which they early asserted that the path to truth is through doubt and investigation. While we may notice that an unnecessary barrier stands between us and the numerous followers of this ancient creed, and that out-worn traditions and past prejudices exclude Masonry from the knowledge and sympathies of millions of men, we accept the situation which is perhaps the logical result of centuries of antagonism, confident that our institution will prosper in the future as in the past.

Masonry is growing stronger by reason of its very universality. An institution is naturally valued for its numbers and power. A society whose ritual is taught at San Francisco and Boston and New Orleans and Paris and Berlin, by the Neva, the Ganges, and the Amazon, whose affiliates are met by the Craft wherever they travel, may well command the admiration of the world; while it has so many points of contact with civilization everywhere that a small percentage of growth immensely increases its aggregate numbers.

Masonry holds what it gains because it never proselytes. To no man whatever is the suggestion made to become a Mason. If he enters here at all, it is of his own free will and accord—the result of his own reflection and investigation. Hence he can accuse no one of deception, of false inducement to cross the portals of the Lodge. Being the fruit of his own determination, his purpose is more apt to be stable than it would be were it to spring from the influence of friends.

I have thus briefly glanced at a few of the causes of the vigorous youth and luxuriant manhood of Masonry. Undoubtedly there are many others which will suggest themselves to a diligent student of its history and philosophy, and which are worthy of careful study. Whatever those causes (the effect has been stupendous. Wherever the sun, in his steady march from clime to clime, looks down upon a civilized race, there our powerful institution has been planted—there are the memorials of the beauty and usefulness of Masonry. Beyond the range of civilization, in the remotest Arctic regions at that time attained by man, our eminent Bro. KANE planted the symbols of the Craft. He tells us that on the highest land, not only of America but of the globe, he set up the flag which WILKES had carried into the Antarctic seas, and which had been preserved as a relic, "floating from a black cliff over the dark rock-shadowed waters which rolled up and broke in with caps at its base. Side by side with this were our Masonic emblems of the compass and the square." In the new continent at the antipodes, lately tenanted by the wildest race of men and abounding in the strangest productions of nature—where, during scarcely more than the space of a generation, populous communities have subdued the wilderness and adorned it with all the embellishments of civilized life—our pervading Order has erected its temples. Wherever the Mason travels into foreign countries he may work and receive master's wages. The beneficent genius of our institution attends his steps, furnishes companionship and cheer, alleviates his misfortunes, relieves his wants, and illustrates the brotherhood of man.

Here, to-day, in this beautiful temple of Masonry, in the heart of this city which thirty years ago did not exist, surrounded by thousands of the Craft who are busy with their industries as you legislate upon their Masonic interests, here, in the metropolis of a Pacific empire whose growing power gives promise of majestic destiny—citizens of a free land where intelligence, virtue, and happiness are every-one's birthright—you may rise above the slavery of prejudice into the liberty of humanity, and mould our institution into the proportions of the skies which grandly overhang us, pure as the health-giving breezes which fan us, grand as our mountains that lift their snow-crowned summits into the upper light, and eternal as the stars which keep holy vigil through the ages.