

**Grand Lodge
Free & Accepted Masons
Of California
Grand Oration 1884**

**Grand Orator
John H. Dickinson**

MOST WORSHIPFUL GRAND MASTER AND BRETHREN OF THE GRAND LODGE

Again we are assembled to review the work of a year and to take counsel together for the future, a future which I hope will be as happy, prosperous, and harmonious as has been our immediate past.

The impulse in the mind of a young Mason, and I am one of the youngest among you, on an occasion like this, when he is imbued with that zeal and admiration of a great and noble association which is natural to the novitiate, is to speak of its first organization, of its history, and to point out with pride the various mile stones which mark its progress in the past. But this is not my purpose to-day. A survey of the past is for the student, and an analysis of the causes which gave rise to and have fostered Masonry is for the philosopher. The present and the immediate future is of most interest to us who now bear the heat and burden of the day, and upon whom is devolved the duty of transmitting to the next generation our Order, improved, solidified, and better for our having been its protectors and promoters.

I would not by any means be understood as shutting out the past, nor is its study without profit to all; but in these stirring times in all departments of science, labor, and association, it is not for Masons to dwell among the dead, but—standing as they do upon a platform of but one plank, and that Humanity and endorsing the principles of that faith which seeks its object until found, of that hope which burns ever brightly within the human breast, and of that charity which covers the whole earth, extends beyond its confines and across the dark river into that unknown country from whose bourne no traveler returns,—to carefully consider the present and wisely determine the future. As we are endowed with knowledge by the Supreme Grand Master, and opportunities are afforded us for the ennobling of our race and of bettering our own condition, in that proportion are our responsibilities the greater. Our talents were not given us to hide, or to let rust in idleness, but to be increased and added to.

Perhaps more than ever before in its history Masonry is threatened with innovations; and whether it can and will with stand them is about to become a very serious question with us. This is an age of innovation, an age of free-thought and disregard for the past and its precedents, and, in our own Order, many are lending themselves to the encouragement of schemes and societies which tend to lessen, by the natural process of familiarity, the respect in which some of our best founded tenets are now held. It is true that the horizon seems clear to the eye and no dark cloud is looming up, but nevertheless, Masons all over our land are originating and participating in societies, with rituals largely based upon our own and framed through the knowledge of their authors acquired in the Lodge-room. It is done without intending to violate any vow, betray any secret, or lessen the influence of our Fraternity; but it is damaging and very hazardous to dig as nearly as possible to the foundations of a building, and still not permit it to fall or weaken its standing.

The superstition in man's disposition, and an inseparable part of it, is satisfied by the mysterious in our ceremonial and its observances, but these rapidly lose their force and effect if used slightly or familiarly. Consequently we should be particularly careful how we become associated with societies which largely use our forms, and in the rituals of which many sentences familiar to a Mason are heard. It is well, it is human to be social, but when anything near and dear to us is likely to be affected by that sociality, we must look well to the effect of our action before acting. The brute, the untutored savage, and man, alike degenerate and die when deprived of the companionship of their fellows. The mind contracts when isolated; it expands by communion. One great pride of our Order is that all are brought to the same level, and may there commune, each with the other, having no regard for the titles of the world. Around our altar poverty and riches, comparative ignorance and shining intelligence, bow the knee together and alike address

themselves to One Supreme Being. Such is the force of association; and as our Order, in its effects upon the present and its possibilities for the future, is the one of all others which commends itself to the intelligence of our age, the responsibility is the greater upon us, its custodians. In Masonry man finds all the elements which, by his nature, are essentially necessary to his happiness and prosperity: Its religious teachings are such as to challenge the confidence of those of every sect, creed, and nation. No one's religious convictions are interfered with, but he must believe in the One Great Author of all, and acknowledge His supremacy. The details as to how or when He shall be worshiped is left to each individual, and it may with perfect safety be so left.

Good morals are not only taught, but their practice is demanded; and thus the virtues are upheld and the golden rule enforced. To be a good Mason is to be a good citizen, a good man, and an observer of the rights of others in all the varied relations of life. There is more unity of thought, feeling, and action among us than in any other society on earth, and that is because we more nearly appeal to the intelligent sense of mankind and have fewer loopholes through which novelties and schisms may be introduced. Neither does it require great thought or research to understand its tenets, as in their simplicity is a great element of strength; for a child can understand them, and he who runs may read and find expressed in words that which his nature and his conscience at once say is the truth.

Man being so naturally social in his nature, it would have a very beneficial effect upon our Order if its members would attend more regularly the meetings of their Lodges; for by so doing they encourage younger members and acquire strength themselves. It is a necessity in man that he should associate with his fellow man, exchange ideas with him, and thus, by the friction of mind with mind, the progress of the world is assured. The hermit contributes nothing to the advancement of the human family; neither does the student who isolates himself from human society do anything more than elaborate schemes and ideas already in existence, Neither can man exist in a state of moral isolation without degenerating to the level of the brute. How the child is impressed by and acts according to its surroundings and teachings! how easily its actions are directed aright, or it strays from the paths of rectitude! And man, being but a child of larger growth, is proportionately more puffed up with a sense of his importance than improved in wisdom by his years. This necessity for association is the substratum upon which all societies, orders, and governments rest; and Masonry, being so great a bulwark against the advance of wrong, such an encourager of the right, and so powerful a promoter of man's welfare, we should be more attentive to its best interests, and, by more frequent attendance upon its ministrations, extend its power and influence and keep bright its fire upon the altars of our hearts. There are too many who utterly neglect attending their own or any Lodge. It is not unusual to hear a Mason remark, "I have not attended a Lodge for years." Is it strange that such a one becomes indifferent to its obligations forgets its forms, and neglects its teachings-that he should run after strange gods and too often disgrace the Order? Certainly, it is not; but it is the natural result of those natural laws which regulate man's conduct; and this result would be, in a great degree, avoided by more frequent association with Masonry and its teachings; for by this a beneficial effect accrues directly to the brother himself.. and indirectly he assists every other brother by the encouragement thus given him. No man is so insignificant in any particular but that he exerts an influence in the world for good or for evil, which influence reacts upon himself. Bear this in mind and let the good have the preference.

" Present example gets within our guard,
And acts with double force by few repelled.
As bees mix nectar drawn from fragrant flowers,
So men from friendship, wisdom and delight.

Masonry does not seek to make proselytes, but it demands the active cooperation of all its members and is continually striving, silently but effectively, to arouse and keep alive faith in the present and in the future; such faith as makes glad the heart of man and illuminates his pathway, elevates humanity in the principles of morality, increases domestic and personal happiness, and makes life worth the living and the rewards promised in the future of value.

" Faith speaks aloud, distinct, even adders hear;
Faith builds a bridge across the Gulf of Death,
To break the shock, kind nature cannot shun,

And lands thought sweetly on the farther shore.

Again the progress and welfare of our Order are to be greatly enhanced by the exercise of prudence in the administration of its affairs. Personal prudence is the duty of every man, and by its exercise he attains success; by its disregard he meets with failure. The disregard of this virtue by an individual in his own affairs brings immediate punishment, and his attention is continually directed to the preservation of his mental and physical health by the suffering which follows the infraction of nature's laws; but this is not necessarily so in organizations or societies of men. The consequences being more remote, the results of imprudence are more likely to be overlooked and carelessness indulged in. I sometimes question the propriety of having so many Lodges—many of them being so weak that it is practically impossible to exemplify in their purity the tenets of Freemasonry. I do not mean to discredit the zealous efforts of those worthy brethren who have organized and maintain small Lodges but in brotherly kindness say unto them—have you not, in too many instances, undertaken too much; has not your zeal overstepped your prudence, and are you not staggering under a load greater than you can bear; and, in your efforts to maintain your position, are you not continually doing imprudent things? Again, in the matter of membership, there is a growing tendency to a rivalry among Lodges, such as leads to the admission of many who are deficient in some of the qualifications requisite in a Mason. Too little inquiry is made into the character of the candidate, and often regret follows his admission because the exercise of prudence did not precede it. Great numbers are not requisite, but good material is—such material as will act as leaven and, by its acts, its example, its daily walk, tend to leaven the whole world. In reading, I have often been pleasantly affected by the example of the village Pastor and Father, which is so frequently delineated in stories of rustic life such an one as the poet describes—

" A true good man there was there of religion
Pious and poor, the Parson of a town
But rich he was in holy thought and work
And thereto a right learned man, a clerk
that Christ's pure gospel would sincerely preach
And his parishioners devoutly teach."

The influence of such a man is not because of his learning, but by reason of his sympathy, his example, his faith in the good, and his frowning upon the evil about him; and such is the influence the Lodge should exert. To do this there must be an aggregate of men, each of whom is an example of himself; for remember that the charitable sympathy of a Lodge is continually exercised in the sight of God and man as well as in that secret, unostentatious manner which stamps the gift as coming from brothers who freely give for the love of giving.

The Lodge is affected in the eyes of the world by the action of any one of its number, and the criticism of the scoffer is poured upon the whole body for the fault of one of its members. Bear this in mind and exercise the utmost care in the first admission of any man within our sacred portals. Weigh him in the balance as well as it is given us to know how, and see that he is not wanting, so far as our understanding allows us to judge; be actuated by the desire, not of swelling our numbers, but of gathering together the good and true; thus we shall continue to merit and receive the admiration and respect of the world at large, increase our field of usefulness and influence, and last, but not least, have the approval of our own consciences. It is not permitted to anything to be perfect, but the degree of perfection which may be attained is unlimited except by the existence of life itself.

Prudence, therefore, is the rock upon which the existence and progress of Masonry largely depends, and by its exercise the history of the past may be verified and the promises of the future become realities, while the happiness of the present is indefinitely increased.

Again, the influence of our Order is at times impaired by the false charity and sympathy which too frequently permits an unworthy member to retain his position as such. Of course it is an unpleasant duty to perform the trying and punishing of a backsliding Mason, but life has many unpleasant duties and they are not to be shunned, but must be performed or evil results must follow. All society has to purge itself of those who disregard their obligations, and the necessity for so doing is but the effect of their own misconduct. He who becomes a Mason has every incentive to be an honest man, and thus reap all the honors and happiness allotted to mortals upon earth and which follow a life well spent. Upon the threshold of Masonry he met with the assurance, and guaranteed, that brotherly love is no idle phrase, but that it greets him in truth and

sincerity, and will relieve his necessities as well as encourage and assist him in prosperity. The virtues of temperance and fortitude and prudence and justice he is counseled to practice, not as a compliment to Masonry not as meaningless advice, but because they are essential to his welfare in this world and indispensable in the next. Within the Lodge he is constantly taught to do unto others as he would have them do unto him. He has become a member of an Order which has withstood the mutations of time and endured persecution for the sake of right and justice; which has seen government, and States totter and tumble and rulers of renown lose their powers; which has fostered and preserved true religion when attacked by bigotry and superstition; and which has been held together by virtue of the trust and confidence of man in man, and by its observance of our fundamental tenets taken from the inexorable laws of the Deity (the non-observance of which would produce political, moral and religious chaos); and which is therefore justly entitled to receive his respect, yea, his veneration. Such is the body the Mason becomes a member of, and if the brightness of its legends, the glory of its past, the sense of self-preservation in the present, and its lustrous promises for the future, are insufficient to cause him to observe his vows and remain a worthy member of our Order, then it is our solemn, painful duty to unflinchingly discipline him, and, if necessary, expel him from a noble company having such exalted duties to perform, and, in the kindness which lops off a member that the whole body may not be contaminated, regretfully, and in all charity, take from him the badge of a Mason, that it may not be slurred and disgraced. Thus do we perform a duty just as incumbent upon us as is any other duty in the Order. Neither do we injure him whom we so treat, for any Mason who uses his Masonry for the advancement of selfish ends, who intrigues against his brethren, who produces disorder among them, or who, by his conduct, tarnishes the glory which encircles the name, is unworthy to associate with men, is regardless of his duties to himself, his fellows and the Creator, and should be permitted, yea forced, to associate with his kind, and is entitled to no sympathy from those who have a regard for their vows and for their duties.

Again, the ritual is slighted oftentimes in our Lodges to the detriment of the Order. A knowledge of our forms and ceremonies, and the ability of our officers to observe and go through them without halting and stumbling, is necessary to obtain and maintain for them the respect which is their due. Mankind like to be engaged in, and connected with something mysterious; there is a fascination connected with secrecy, with signs and emblems, and a certain pride exists in the breast of every man who knows something that the world at large is ignorant of; but a careless, indifferent, halting performance of the ceremonies, and an uncertain manner in giving and interpreting signs and emblems destroys this fascination, removes the glamour of the mysterious, and puts the whole matter too much within the realities of life to be effective; therefore the good of our Order requires that everything be conducted with confidence and knowledge, and that no Mason should accept an office unless able and willing to perform its duties in the manner and with the knowledge and spirit expected of him, and which Masonry has the right to demand he shall use and exhibit. Our burial service is most impressive, perfectly simple and exquisitely beautiful, and yet how often is it woefully emasculated, mutilated, and rendered in a manner painful to Masons and unintelligible to friends! All matters of this kind can be easily remedied by attention and application, and, while their neglect may not affect the substance of our belief and interest, yet it does insensibly but materially affect our feelings and justifiable enthusiasm. Masonry is rapidly swelling its membership throughout the United States at the present time. Let us therefore be more than ever careful that, in the excitement of the moment, we do not weaken its essentials and their due observance; but on the contrary let us be more vigilant in preserving the beauties of its order and simplicity, for in the observance of details is to be found the true index of the quality of our work, the interest and sincerity of our convictions.

Thus have I endeavored, in accordance with our Constitution, to speak of matters pertaining to the welfare of the Craft. With a heart full of love and admiration for our Order, its beautiful symbols and salutary teachings, I could go on and on, but I feel that I have suggested such pertinent topics for thought and reflection that I may pause and leave the details to yourselves. Masonry means cosmopolitan brother-hood, the embracing of a world within its influence and its lessons. As ignorance is displaced by intelligence, as man is elevated above the brute and the power to discern between right and wrong increases, as the affections are quickened and conscience is awakened, so will the tenets of Masonry be spread around the globe: therefore it is

well for us to consider subjects such as I have quickly and imperfectly passed over. Let us not be found wanting in the performance of our Masonic duties or regardless of our obligations. Upon you, my brethren, rests the outward sign of the inward responsibility which Masonry imposes. You occupy the stations of honor and trust within her tylered door; and to you she looks for such examples of Temperance, Fortitude, Prudence, and Justice as shall cause all others to emulate you in your Masonic character. FAITH looks to you as the exponent of her all powerful principles; HOPE relies upon you to keep alive her virgin fires in the breasts of your fellow man; and CHARITY asks of you that her mantle shall be thrown over all, and in such a manner that their thanks, rising to Heaven above, shall sound sweeter than the "Music of the Spheres" to hearts bent upon relieving the distressed, and which know that great and golden rule of "Do unto others as you would they should do unto you." Tarnish not the characters which now you bear, but let them pass to your successors, adorned by the virtues of a conscientiously, intelligently spent Masonic life. For in so doing you but perform your duties.

"The primal duties shine aloft like stars,
The charities, that soothe and heal and bless,
Are scattered at the feet of man like flowers."

Tread not upon them but gather them up carefully, reverently perform them, be thankful for the privilege, and you shall surely reap the reward promised to those who are true to their manhood, their nature, and their God.