

**Grand Lodge
Free & Accepted Masons
Of California
Grand Oration 1909**

**Grand Orator
Benjamin F. Bledsoe
"OPERATIVE OR SPECULATIVE?"**

Emerson has said that "the kind of men the nation produces is the true test of a nation's greatness." Whether it be an oligarchy or a democracy, whether it be based on constitutional liberty or be the product of an absolute despotism, a nation's place in history is determined by the men it gives to the world.

The same observation is peculiarly true of each and every of our great fraternal organizations. All, so far as I am advised, are founded upon enduring principles of equality, fraternity and morality. No one however achieves distinction save from the character and class of men who bear its banner forward. The particular lessons taught by-its ritual if known, would be but a secondary consideration with an applicant for admission. There is no occasion for the individual who desires merely to become acquainted with high ideals or great moral truths, to pass the closely guarded portals of any secret society. The best teachings of the best fraternity ever instituted among men cannot compare with the simple lessons which fell from the lips of the Man of Nazareth and which today are the comfort, the solace and the inspiration of enlightened manhood and womanhood everywhere. He, however, who desires not only to be and do good, but also to be and remain in constant touch and close communion with men who are similarly inclined and who by the force of initiative, superior will or friendly example may lead him on to higher and better things in life, if he have any inclinations toward membership in a fraternal society such as ours, will instinctively turn to that one whose roll of membership comes nearest, in his opinion, to a roll of honor. He will sedulously seek the fraternal companionship of those men who, in their daily existence, in their social and business relations, in the multitude of trivialities that go to make up this complex thing called "life," give an outward proof of an inward determination to be of benefit to their fellow man. He will knock at those doors that offer the greatest assurance of opening upon men whose character and standing and deeds of high resolve have made for substantial progress toward the betterment of humankind.

Fraternities, like unto nations, then, are gauged by their men. The only fraternity that can be great is that fraternity which has or has had great men to mould and shape its course—men great not because they have acquired unusual wealth or attained unusual preferment, but because of their extraordinary capacity to foresee man's opportunities to do good and because of their innate ability to "do noble things, not dream them all day long." And as that nation that gives to its citizens the best environment, the best government and the least restraint compatible with the general tranquility, thereby serves to develop the best and the greatest of men, so that fraternity whose basic principles, teachings of morality and accepted standards of good conduct most nearly approach the divine attributes of God's Appointed, furnishes the most sublime examples of fraternal loyalty and human endeavor.

Lord Brougham, one of the greatest of British statesmen, once said: "All that we see about us. Kings, Lords and Commons, the whole machinery of the State, all the apparatus of the system and its varied workings, end in simply bringing twelve good men into a box." By this he meant that governments are instituted among men, constitutions are ordained, executives are clothed with power, congresses and parliaments are assembled, laws are enacted and tribunals are set up simply and solely in order that society and every individual member thereof shall be the recipient of that which is justly due—nothing more, nothing less.

In the same way, fraternal societies have been organized, rituals have been compiled, obligations have been administered, lectures have been delivered. Grand and Subordinate Lodges have been constituted and convened, in order that there might be caused to be written, in letters of living light, along the horizon of the activities of every human being, that phrase so pregnant with hope for humanity—"I am my brother's keeper."

Freemasonry has ever been noted for its men—men who have been the leaders in the world's activities; men who have shed a bright and enduring lustre on. The kaleidoscopic page of history; men who have brought solace and sunshine into the homes and hearts of the widowed and orphaned and fanned anew the fires of fraternal love in the breasts of the aged and incapacitated; yea, men who have seen and felt in Liberty, Equality, Fraternity and Morality the touchstones of human progress, the capstones of human achievement.

But again, just as it is true that no nation can live and thrive on the record of its glorious past, so it is also true that no great fraternity can so live and thrive. The place that Freemasonry will occupy in the world's estimation tomorrow is not the place that it occupied yesterday, but the place that it is making for itself today.

"Over my head the stars, distant and pale and cold;
Under my feet the world, wrinkled and scarred and old;
Back of me all that was, all the limitless Past,
The Future waiting beyond, silent, untenanted, vast;

"Babylon lies in the dust; never a sentinel calls
With fear on his parted lips from any of Ninevah's walls;
Troy is only a name; Caesar is deaf to praise,
Back of me spreads the Past in numberless yesterdays;

"I stand at the end of the Past—where the Future begins I stand;
Emperors lie in the dust; men may live to command;
But greater than rulers unborn, greater than kings who have reigned
Am I that have hope in my heart, and victories still to be gained!
Under my feet the world; over my head the sky—
Here at the center of things, in the Living Present am I!"

Let it not, for any cause, be said of our organization that it exhibits much in the way of promise but little in the way of endeavor. "The waves of shame and sorrow roll over the ruins of many lives that have found shipwreck in a sea of promises." Promises without performance do not constitute fraternity, any more than great faith and no works constitutes religion. In Masonry we want to think well of a man not for having taken an obligation to do many things. Nor even for having taken many obligations to do one thing, but for having done a few things.

Our Ancient Brethren were workers. They wrought in wood and stone and marble and brass, and they knew how to use to advantage the square, the level and the plumb. To them alone, partly by reason of a monopoly, principally by reason of their superior attainments as practical builders, were entrusted the building, the squaring, the leveling and the truing of all great works of architecture. Since the reorganization of the craft in England, however, we, their successors, have been content to describe ourselves as Speculative Masons, and to refer to our Ancient Brethren whose garb we have put on and whose tools we employ, as Operative Masons. They were operative Masons; they worked; they builded—builded even better than they knew. The results of their endeavors were and are yet seen in the many imposing edifices of the Old World. We engage in no such works; our hands are strangers to the chisel and the mallet, and it would be a most arduous undertaking, I dare say, for even our Most Worshipful Grand Master, primus inter pares, the first among us, to endeavor to apply the tools of architecture of our Ancient Brethren, now symbolically employed by us, to the uses for which they were originally intended.

We would do well, though, I apprehend, my brothers, were we to take to ourselves more of the operative characteristics that seemed to ennoble, and perpetuate the virtues of, our "Masonic ancestors. To be speculative is to be philosophical, meditative, and contemplative; it implies a condition of mere thinking—thinking perhaps of what has been done, or thinking even of what ought to be done—but it is not doing. Our Ancient Brethren, the operative Masons, did not retire to the recesses of their closets, there to contemplate and reflect upon—the needs of their time. Masonry, intended and regarded, as the most practical exemplification of the living, breathing principles of Fraternity that the world may ever know, is not, and never should be permitted to

become, the field for mere Casuists. Works, practical results, genuine successes along any lines of endeavor, are secured only, if at all, by workers. We must become, once more. Operative Masons.

Masonry, in its every conception, ought to be essentially active, transitive, dynamic, energetic, operative, rather than passive, intransitive, static, inert, speculative. We must remember that there is no nobler sentiment than that of him who said: "There is a loftier ambition than merely to stand high in the world; it is to stoop down and lift mankind a little higher. There is a nobler character than that • which is merely incorruptible; it is that character which acts as an antidote and preventive of corruption."

The genius of our Ancient Brethren lay in rearing Heavenward those mightily piles, of Antiquity, dedicated and devoted to religious uses. With them, as workers in wood and stone, Man's duty to God and Man was best sub served by erecting those temporal buildings wherein all might unite in rendering praise and thanksgiving unto the ever-living God. To us, since we no longer work in wood and stone, is now entrusted the more ennobling duty of fitting our minds as living stones for that spiritual building, that house not made with hands, eternal in the Heavens. Ours is the duty of fashioning temples, as was theirs; not temples, however, of blocks and timbers, adorned with gold and silver and precious stones, but temples of flesh and blood, enriched and imbued with an immortal spirit—a spirit which, reflecting the paternity of God, proclaims the fraternity of man; not temples fashioned from human designs and plans, but fashioned in the image of our Common Creator.

Each being with whom we come in contact is such a temple. Wherever that temple stands, so long as it is not wholly lost to the intense divinity of man and the intense humanity of God, there is a field for activity in Operative Masonry. And whoever labors on that edifice with usefulness or distinction; whoever plants its feet upon the firm foundation of truth and virtue; whoever warms its heart to a realization of the nearness of the ever-outstretched hand of Charity and Brotherly Love, ready, willing and anxious to render assistance; whoever guides its hands to deeds of charity and acts of love; whoever contributes to instill into its mind pure thoughts and honorable ambitions, has inseparably linked himself by a chain of sincere affection to the immortal brotherhood of truly operative Ma-sons. He, however, who fails, in Lodge or out, by day or by night, through inadvertence or neglect, when traveling the path either of prosperity or adversity, so to live up to the spirit of his obligations, irrespective of the vows he may have taken, the lectures he may have conned, or the promises he may have given, is not and never can be an Operative Mason. He is in truth and in fact, at best, only a mere Speculative Mason.

Our Ancient Brethren, as I had occasion to observe, and as the early chroniclers testify, enjoyed a monopoly in the matter of building. This monopoly—both benevolent and beneficent in its nature—resulted naturally from their innate ability to carry to a successful conclusion the work, which they entered upon. We, their successors, however, can expect, and should, in fact, desire, to participate in no such monopoly in the work in which we are engaged. Just as it is true that there is no caste in morality, so is it also true that there can be no monopoly of that the seeds of which God himself has planted in every human heart. Masonry today welcomes, and has naught but words of praise for, the efforts of all similar organizations. The State, the Home and the Individual, the beneficiaries of that which we, as Masons, hope and strive to accomplish, will be enabled the sooner to profit, if to our efforts there be added the efforts of others similarly inclined and similarly engaged. It may be true, as existing controversies would seem to indicate, that the North Pole is insufficient in extent to accommodate more than one man; but there can be no doubt that in the broad domain devoted to Fraternity, Equality and Morality, there are to be found fields of activity as boundless as the shores of Time and as measureless as the sands of the sea, wherein all who wish may till.

Temples such as those our Ancient Brethren contrived to erect, beautiful and artistic though they were, were but cold and inanimate objects whose existence was but ephemeral. The living temples, which it is our province to adorn, are warmed by the breath of the Eternal Spirit, which will never perish. On yesterday we wended our way to the site of the new Scottish Rite Temple in this city and witnessed the solemn and inspiring ceremonies whereby its cornerstone was lowered into place; in a short while the Craft of our entire great State will unite in the erecting of a new home for this Grand Lodge and its kindred bodies. The architectural splendor of these well proportioned edifices soon-to-be will no doubt bespeak the praise of men throughout all time to

come. The grandeur of the Temple of Solomon on Mount Mariah, never excelled by human effort, a thing of the past though it is, has been the theme and admiration of all successive ages. But the most enduring grandeur, next to that which flows I from the Almighty Throne itself, is the grandeur of a noble and well-spent life, wrapping itself in benediction round the destinies of its fellowmen and finally reaching its eternal home in the blessed bosom of the everlasting God.

Tradition tells us that when Cornelia, the noble Roman matron, was called upon to exhibit her most precious possessions, she pointed to her two sturdy sons, known in history as the Gracchi, the Tribunes of the people, who gave their lives that Rome might not perish, and proudly said, "These are my jewels."

Let it be our constant endeavor, my brothers, so to live and act as operative Masons that when we are called upon to render an account of our stewardship to our Supreme Grand Master above, we may point with pride not only to the halls and temples and similar edifices erected under our direction and supervision, but also to a galaxy of men— noble men—whose hearts have been caused to respond to the eternal truths, whose tongues have been taught to proclaim the living principles, and whose hands have been guided to perform the glorious deeds that go to make up practical, operative Fraternity.

Masonry, true operative Masonry, is as enduring as it is universal. Appealing to the better nature of man, divorcing him from his baser instincts, it will last as long as Time itself. Though existing under the ban of the Church, persecuted as an enemy by intolerant governments and denounced by untiring fanatics, "it still stands, like some patriarchal monarch of the forest, with its vigorous roots riveted to the soil, and its broad limbs spread in bold outline against the sky," the first and foremost of its kind.

May its ideal exponent be described and depicted as one whose good deeds outshine his aspirations, whose aspirations o'erleap his obligations, and whose obligations mount up as high as the bounds of human endeavor and reach down as low as the depths of human necessity.

Nor think such an ideal too high. No ideal is too high merely because it may appear to be beyond our reach, "else," as Browning said, "why a Heaven?" Throughout all ages God has implanted in the heart of man a yearning for the ideal, and man has ever best reflected God's ultimate purpose by worshiping at its shrine. Ours may be the materialistic age, but, as of yore, the idealistic will ever be its goal.

"Mother Earth! are the heroes dead?
Do they thrill the soul of the years no more?
Are the gleaming snows and the poppies red
All that is left of the brave of yore?
Are there none to fight as Theseus fought,
Far in the young world's misty dawn?
Or to teach as the gray-haired Nestor taught?
Mother Earth! are the heroes gone?

"Gone? In a grander form they rise;
Dead? We may clasp their hands in ours;
And catch the light of their clearer eyes
And wreath their brows with immortal flowers.
Wherever a noble deed is done
'Tis the pulse of a hero's heart is stirred;
Wherever right has a triumph won
There are the heroes' voices heard.

"Their armor rings on a fairer field
Than the Greek and the Trojan fiercely trod,
For Freedom's sword is the blade they wield,
And the light above is the smile of God.
So, in his isle of calm delight,
Jason may sleep the years away;
For the heroes live, and the sky is bright,

And the world is a braver world today."