

**Grand Lodge
Free & Accepted Masons
Of California
Grand Oration 1931**

**Grand Orator
Leslie E. Learned**

Brethren of the Grand Lodge

I am deeply sensible of the responsibility devolving upon the speaker who is commissioned by the Grand Master of any jurisdiction to deliver the annual oration to a representative body of Free and Accepted Masons. It is required of such an officer that he shall be well informed in the ceremonial of the Fraternity, and also that, from a wide and thoughtful acquaintance with mankind, he shall be able to interpret the ancient and profound principles of the Rite.

I do not stand here, therefore, merely to utter in sonorous English a succession of bombastic syllables, the sound of which shall be agreeable to your ears, but to speak as simply as I may to my brother Masons concerning the imponderable and eternal significance of our degrees. Most, if not all of you, are very familiar with the phraseology and the work of the Lodge room. Many of you have dwelt at length upon the inner meaning of our ritual. But it has been given to few of those who pass through the ascending series of our official positions until they occupy the exalted place in the East, to pursue studies and to travel widely in order that an adequate comprehension of Masonic truth is in their possession.

Indeed, no living man would dare to make that claim. Yet, I am here to act as your spokesman and to interpret your inner emotions, your sincere reactions and your high resolves, which in greater or less degree, Masonry has created in your minds and hearts.

Humbly, earnestly, faithfully and with enthusiasm I now address myself to this task.

It baffles the imagination to visualize the far-flung scope and history of Free Masonry. Its ritual discovers its origin in the ancient kingdom of Judea over three thousand years ago, and who can say how long before. Mystic symbols are discernible by the initiate in many lands and wider varied skies. When our own era dawns and those mighty movements of the new age gather momentum, history shows the active influence of our Institution in the Crusades for the recovery of the Holy Land. It is not easy to pick up the threads of an organization which has always treasured its secrets and maintained inviolable its high principles of faith and conduct. But ever and again an operative Mason leaves his mark upon the enduring granite or marble and we, of a later age, stand in silence before the relic. Only this summer I thus stood in the Temple Church only a few feet from the busy traffic of Fleet street in the very heart of London and conjured up the scenes which the sculptured forms of the Knights brought vividly to mind, their weary marches, the burning noontides, the desert nights with the cool stars overhead, and dreams of the clash of arms on the morrow.

If only we could gather together the secrets of those myriads of our brethren in the storied past, how our hearts would thrill at the recital !

It is well to interpret this august past to each other, meager though our knowledge be. Think of what it means that each new brother who is made a Master Mason, is introduced into so noble and ancient a heritage ! He is lifted out of petty and narrow environment into the imponderable antiquity of human life at its best. He is no longer a child of the present, engaged in buying and selling, in building and transportation. He is made a companion of the multitude of brethren of many nations, and he views the pageant of the long history of those who have passed from step to step in the identical symbolism to which he has just been introduced. It is as if a gigantic panorama had been passed before his eyes, as, blindfolded. he has been led through the mystic wonder of the Master's degree and by some most modern touch of movie tone, has heard the voices of the far past sounding in his ears, saying, "We passed this way centuries ago, my brother. We have seen and you will see. Years came and went before we understood, but by patience and fortitude you, too, will grasp in part the age-long, world-wide meaning of Masonic mysteries."

Masonry, therefore, paints a picture. On its canvas move vast numbers of men. Leaders of great movements are there. Founders of nations loom high in the great throng, Godfrey de Bouillon, the Crusader; Jacques de Molay, the Templar; Washington, the first figure of our

beginning history as a nation, are a Trinity of fame among many others. Our Institution summons every Master Mason to this high privilege of partnership with these great men. They, too, drank deep of the fountains of wisdom in our unchanging ceremonial. They, also, interpreted the mystic symbolism of the Rite. And they knew the august inspiration of words which have meaning so profound that secrecy must wrap its concealing folds about the mystery which runs on in the hearts of men like the underground rivers of California.

Listen to these words of James Russell Lowell, descriptive of Washington, whose fame, in spite of cheap and superficial critics stands secure:

"Soldier and statesman, rarest unison;
High-poised example of great duties done.
Dumb for himself, unless it were to God,
But for his barefoot soldiers eloquent,
Tramping the snow to coral where they trod.
Modest, yet firm as nature's self; unblamed
Save by the men his nobler temper shamed;
Never seduced through show of present good.
Rigid, but with himself first, grasping still
In swerveless poise the wave-beat helm of will;
Not honored then or now because he wooed
The popular voice.
Broad-minded, higher-souled, there is but one

Who was all this and ours, and all men's—Washington!"

It is logical, from this great delineator of the character of our foremost American Mason, to pass to a brief consideration of the scope and meaning of our Institution in this country where the majority of us had our birth.

Have you ever studied our own inviolable and unchanging obligations as Master Masons, in relation to the principles which underlie our Constitution? Have you, as American citizens, ever sought to connect the two roles which you play in public, that of a free voter, and that of a Free and Accepted Mason? Or have you rested complacently in your election to some Lodge in the Craft and wholly or partially treated your duties as a citizen with scant respect?

Alas! How many Masons are poor citizens! How many are either slaves of their prejudices or blind to their country's dire needs! How many follow the perilous fires of the pursuit of wealth or the gratification of their lowest appetites with no thought of the enormous evil which accrues to the country they profess to love!

Every member of the Lodge, to say nothing of those who have taken the higher degrees, cannot thus neglect his duty to the nation without violating certain deep and fundamental responsibilities to this great Institution which is here assembled in Grand Lodge.

For Masonry stands today as it always stood, for freedom, for the possibility of the greatest good and the highest place for every man despite any conditions of birth, occupation, or fortune. Masonry is the bulwark of true democracy. Note, my brethren, certain familiar facts too often left out of consideration when one rejoices in his Masonic fellowship. First, that there is no caste in a Masonic Lodge. The chairs are not reserved for the rich or for the highly educated, or for the lawyer, doctor or clergyman. The poorest Mason may hold and often does hold the highest position the Lodge officers in the sacred East, but none has a monopoly of the opportunity.

But why use up our time by reiterating such a commonplace fact in the life and experience of a Mason? Because, my brethren, only a few, and those who are widely read in the long and devious history of mankind, realize the incessant struggle mankind has waged to reach such a happy principle, and how equally difficult it is to maintain this principle which lies at the very foundation of democratic institutions.

Corruption stalks openly abroad in our cities at the expense of honest merchants and innocent babies' lives. There is no great city which can hold its head erect as a guarantor of the inalienable rights of a man to run his business as he pleases without tribute. Such a condition is not freedom. It is slavery of the deepest dye and it should bring the blush of shame to the cheek of every Mason, that such conditions are permitted to continue. Imagine, my brothers, a secret organization within the Grand Lodge, which permitted no man to occupy the position of

Worshipful Master, without an enforced tribute to this cabal of hidden Masonic robbers and thieves! Why! The thought is absurd. Masonry would not last a decade under such conditions. What sane man, of his own free will and accord, would become a member of such a corrupt order?

Why, then, do we find it in our political life? *Because millions of Masonic brethren throughout our land are indifferent and apathetic, or worst of all, absentees at the polls.*

I realize that Masonry, as such, must never organize for political results. There must never be in any nation, a Masonic political party. That, too, is written large in the tenets of our Free Masonry. But that is not to say that we must carry our Masonry in our hearts and our citizenship in the tough soles of our feet.

The undying flame of the light which every brother has seen, as he emerges from darkness, symbolizes liberty, freedom, and equality of opportunity for every man, always and everywhere. Masonry can never tolerate a dictator who rides roughshod over popular rights. Masonry can never permit an oligarchy of the favored classes to decide the doctrines of a nation. Masonry operates, as Almighty God operates, through the wills of men, inoculated with its enduring principles, and we must see to it that increasingly the vast impact of our purposes and ideals shall destroy the corruption and debasement of our American cities and institutions. Quietly but powerfully, we must work and vote for men who will be strong for the right and yet never seekers for their own autocratic place and power.

The work of the Lodge is not therefore, a vain repetition of time-honored syllables. A Mason is supposed to conceal within the secret places of his mind a considerable number of words and phrases. But our Fraternity will cease to attract men of the calibre we desire, unless the mystic symbols are deeply interpreted and adequately applied to the morals and government of the land in which we live. Patriotism is more than proud self-congratulation that America is a country of broad rivers and fertile and lofty mountains. No country ever has, or ever can maintain its vitality by enjoying its scenery. The foundation stone of Masonry is mystic brotherhood and its degrees insist in unequivocal and emphatic terms, that such fraternal obligations are concerned, not merely with the craft. but with the whole human race.

This is not a sermon, my brethren, but a plain talk in blunt language about Masonic obligations which shall send Master Masons out to the busy marts of trade imbued with moral enthusiasm. We shall come, in a moment, to the two highest revelations to men, who travel ever toward the truth of the sunrise. I am reserving them for the final paragraphs of this oration. Just now I am concerned with the reputation of men who call themselves Masons, with their reputation among those with whom they are associated in the home, in the mill, in our great buildings, and in their hours of leisure by night and in the day.

Does your wife look upon you as a man who exemplifies truth and loyalty for her, whom you have pledged yourself to love and to cherish until death do us part? Does your family discover in you strength and honor and patience and tenderness the morning after you have been to lodge. Is there no suspicion of your untrustworthiness in the minds of your business acquaintances? Is your word as good as your bond? Have you ever made money, knowing that another man or woman would surely lose in the transaction?

These are the questions for us to face today, and they are all concerned with homes and with our country. Politics too often degenerate into not too honorable methods to keep a given party in power, but a country prospers only when good and true men are at the helm to insure common honesty and sweet purity and so, enduring safety to the little children, their mothers and their fathers.

If you and I have traveled Masonic ways and on our knees have taken its solemn oaths without making a stern resolution thus to fulfill in public what has been secretly conferred upon us, then we have miserably failed to reach the lofty goal of Masonic purpose.

It is not an idle act to remember the great word which calls each and every one here present a Free Mason. It is just that rich possession for humanity which Masonry strives to keep in our hands. Whatever comes, we will not be enslaved by despot or tyrant. We will exercise the heaven born rights of freemen at the polls. We will not suffer our liberties to be stolen from us by specious promises of ease or money. We will suffer hardship in freedom's name. We will never lower the standard of our integrity. On our banners will be emblazoned right, truth, justice, until Free Masons shall by their heroic struggle make this earth a dwelling place for free men everywhere.

Listen to a California poet:

"No, not as in that elder day
Comes now the Master on the human way.
He comes with power: His white unfearing face
Shines through the Social Passion of the race.
He comes to frame the freedom of the Law,
To touch these men of Earth
With a feeling of life's oneness and its worth,
A feeling of its mystery and awe.
He comes to make the long injustice right—
Comes to push back the shadow of the night
The gray Tradition full of flint and flaw—
Comes to wipe out the insults to the soul,
The insults of the Few against the Whole,
The insults they make righteous with a law.
Yea, He will bear the Safety of the State,
Yea, He will lay on souls the power of peace,
And send on kingdoms torn the sense of Home—
More than the fire of Joy that burned on Greece,
More than the light of Law that rose on Rome."

From "The Desire of Nations" by Edwin Markham.

And now, my Brethren, a little time remains for me to bring your minds and emotions face to face with the two holy articles of our Masonic faith.

The layman is modest in giving expression to his feelings on the themes I am now about to discuss. He feels that they are too high for him to describe, and he contents himself with a brief allusion. But the profession of your Grand Orator makes him more courageous, and perhaps fits him to speak simply, but emphatically, about Masonry and religion.

Let me repeat what I have often said before to many Masons, that an enduring bulwark against skepticism and the moral anarchy which invariably goes along with atheism, is found in Masonry.

No skeptic has a right to be a Mason. He perjures himself if he takes our vows, while scoffing in his heart at Almighty God. Here, the Lodge goes hand in hand with the church and synagogue and mosque. In unmistakable terms it confesses a faith in God, which is symbolized by the shining letter in the East, emblematic of the eternal Being Who sits upon the circle of the heavens and takes up the islands of the sea as very little things.

It is well that Masonry does not indulge in long-winded and sanctimonious cant. It treats religion with dignity and reserve, but always insists upon its foremost place in the unchanging principles of the Rite. These easy purveyors of doubt, who write so brilliantly about the decay of religion, do not know what is taught behind the tiled doors of Masonry. Those new rulers in Russia are convinced that they can build a lasting republic upon five-year plans and the embalmed body of a successful revolutionist. But neither do they know that persecution through the long centuries has not availed to crush out the deep faith of Masons.

Nor is it like the religion of the ancient Roman Empire, a sop thrown to the ordinary man while the chosen few discard it. The higher you go in Masonry, the more light shines upon our faith in the Almighty Being Who has created the universe and maintains it by His Divine Power.

Yet it is all to be found around a lonely grave under the green acacia, where the climax of all the lectures and obligations is reached by the one who impersonates the ancient Master. I make no disclosure of our secrets; I only remind you, who are qualified to understand the reference, that when all human power failed, the appeal is made to the Almighty and the prayer is answered. Many of us have received the higher degrees and seen noble ceremonials, but they all hark back to that spot, sacred to every Mason, where prayer to God is made and that petition is fulfilled.

The modern movements of thought are slowly demolishing the materialism which has been a popular doctrine among many scientists during the last century, and the trend of opinion is toward the ancient faith in a Supreme Being to which synagogue and mosque and church have clung and to the essential elements of which the principles of Free Masonry have always been loyal.

I have said on many occasions to my Masonic Brethren that the world can never lose its religion while Masonry lasts. Enshrined in our ceremonial there is a Holy Book and an Almighty

God. Centuries come and go, history plays upon the stupendous keys of the world instrument, nations rise and fall, races vanish or are absorbed by the stronger, civilization alters the methods and appearances of life, but Masonry does not change. It is the most conservative force in the world. It is international. It is inter-racial. It is inter-religious. Mohammedan and Jew and Christian can be and are believers together in the one God, Who has been described in the classic commentary on Free Masonry.

Listen to these words written decades ago by the facile pen of Albert Pike:

"Masonry teaches that God is a Paternal Being, and has an interest in His creatures, such as is expressed in the title 'father'; an interest unknown to all the systems of Paganism, untaught in all the theories of philosophy; an interest not only in the glorious beings of other spheres, the Sons of Light, the dwellers in Heavenly worlds, but in us, poor, ignorant, and unworthy; that He has pity for the erring, pardon for the guilty, love for the pure, knowledge for the humble, and promises of immortal life for those who trust in and obey Him.

"Without a belief in Him, life is miserable, the world is dark, the Universe disrobed of its splendors, the intellectual tie to nature broken the charm of existence dissolved, the great hope of being lost; and the mind, like a star struck from its sphere, wanders through the infinite desert of its conceptions, without attraction, tendency, destiny, or end.

"Masonry teaches that, of all the events and actions that take place in the universe of worlds and the eternal succession of ages, there is not one, even the minutest, which God did not forever foresee, with all the distinctness of immediate vision, combining all, so that man's free will should be His instrument, like all the other forces of nature."

In my own heart I am wondering how you are following the words your spokesman has been uttering. Perhaps some of you have thought that Masonry has been made too idealistic and that it would have been saner to build Masonry frankly upon human fellowship and claim no more for it than the most thoughtless find within the Lodge, merely calling attention to the distinguished men of all nations, who have been proud to call themselves Master Masons. Perhaps others have made charitable allowance for the tenor of my thoughts by saying that he cannot avoid a preachment, seeing he is himself a preacher.

My brothers, we have been blind and deaf, if we have failed to perceive the profound teaching embodied in the ceremonial of the Lodge. Surely it is true that the higher degrees throw a bright light on the first three. But I have not assumed that all of you have had that privilege. Purposely I have confined myself to the deep significance of the original degrees.

Again I quote from the great Masonic teacher:

"Masonry teaches that God is good and merciful, and loves and sympathizes with the creatures He has made; that His finger is visible in all the movements of the moral, intellectual, and material universe that we are His children, the objects of His paternal care and regard, that all men are brothers, whose wants we are to supply, their errors to pardon, their opinions to tolerate, their injuries to forgive; that man has an immortal soul, a free will, a right to freedom of thought and action that all men are equal in God's sight; that we best serve God by humility, meekness, gentleness, kindness and the other virtues which the lowly can practice as well as the lofty, this is 'the new Law,' the 'Word,' for which the world has waited and pined so long."

One great interpretation I have left for the closing words of this oration. Most of us bear our initiate's part in the tragic events of the Master's degree without perceiving the full meaning of our being raised to that exalted degree. We are keenly alive to our prostrate form and to the simple but majestic words by which we are made to assume the normal posture of a man. But we do not delve below the obvious significance of those acts and words which describe an event of the most ancient Masonic history, but which really embody a profound article of faith in the imperishable soul of every man.

Along with the belief in God, Masons must carry from that lonely grave out from which by a mysterious grip we are raised, *a confidence sure and contain in another life beyond and above the present*. If modernism should laugh to scorn such a belief, as a few of its apostles have and do, if the cold conclusions of science leave man to the cold oblivion of the tomb, Masonry will still

keep alive in the hearts of men a faith in the immortal existence of the soul.

The Mason is not indifferent to the fate of the soul, after its present life, as to its continued and eternal being, and the character of the scenes in which that being will be fully developed. These are to him topics of the profoundest interest, and the most ennobling and refining contemplation. They occupy much of his leisure; and as he becomes familiar with the sorrows and calamities of this life, as his hopes are disappointed and his visions of happiness here fade away; when life has wearied him in its race of hours, when he is harassed and toil-worn, and the burden of his years weighs heavy on him, the balance of attraction gradually inclines in favor of another life; and he clings to his lofty speculations with a tenacity of interest which needs no injunction, and will listen to no prohibition. They are the consoling privilege of the aspiring, the way worn, the weary, and the bereaved.

To him the contemplation of the Future lets in light upon the Present, and develops the higher portions of his nature. He endeavors rightly to adjust the respective claims of Heaven and earth upon his time and thought, so as to give the proper proportions thereof to performing the duties and entering into the interests of this world, and to preparation for a better:

—*Morals and Dogma.*

There is an altar in every Masonic Lodge room, no less than in lofty cathedrals. On that altar is always to be found the Holy Volume which contains our faith. Undeviatingly, from century to century, we promulgate our ancient truth. New fashions of speech and thought come and go. New inventions are created and fascinate by alluring sound and motion the sensitive minds and imaginations. New theories of the universe are formulated and, in their turn, are succeeded by still newer scientific conclusions. But Masonry knows the unchanging content of human nature. Our ritual has eliminated the unnecessary and the non-essential. It builds its house on the solid rock of human hope and human need.

It is in close touch with human experience, that great mass of sorrow and joy, of success and failure, of struggle and defeat. It sings the hymn of human history and links together differing climes and peoples under the inclusive harmony of its fraternity and fellowship.

It knows too much to be merely human, for it is convinced that only all Infinite Mind could make so delicate an organ as the human intellect.

It sees too far to be content with the narrow bounds of this visible earthly life, and commands us to lift our eyes to a house eternal in the heavens.

So it makes us free. So we are accepted by the great God on high as the ancient words gain ever greater power over our every thought and deed.