

**Grand Lodge
Free & Accepted Masons
Of California
Grand Oration 1935**

**Grand Orator
Ira F. Thompson**

Most Worshipful Grand Master, Officers and Members of the Grand Lodge

There can be no doubt that it would be interesting for us to review more or less in detail the history of our well loved craft, and to elaborate upon the part it has played in advancing the cause of civilization and the establishment of liberty. But I entertain the notion, either correctly or erroneously, that we are confronted with a problem of tremendous magnitude, not only deserving but also commanding our most earnest and consecrated consideration. And while I approach the task assigned to me in the spirit of humility, yet I am impressed with the firm conviction that in these troubled times we should lay aside all desire to speak in oratorical style, embellished with rhetorical flourishes and ornamented with figures of speech, and should attempt within the limits of our powers, in plain, blunt fashion, to declare those principles which may help in the solution of the problem mentioned.

The world seems all awry. Our fraternity stands condemned upon groundless accusations by those in charge of governmental affairs in two of the great nations of the world. In another it is suppressed, if not quite extinguished. It seems at times as though many men in whom we ought to repose confidence have lost the capacity for straight, clear thinking and that, in the prophetic words of Scripture, our "old men . . . dream dreams" while "our young men . . . see visions." In fact, confusion of thought and an amazing response to every appeal to the passions and prejudices characterize the years. What we have been told constituted the "wisdom of the ages" is questioned and we are almost torn loose from our moorings. There is a school of propaganda (I decline to call it thought) which embraces every opportunity to stir up envy and hatred. It preaches a doctrine abhorrent to Masons, of distinctions between men, setting up class against class. Denying the existence of the Great Architect of the Universe, they constitute materiality and material things their God, and upon this basis deny the importance of the individual except as an adjunct or chattel of the State. Under the guise of what would otherwise be laudable peace movements or movements for youth or class betterment, they insinuate their Godless doctrine and hate messages among the very elect of the people. And the credulity of man stands appallingly revealed. Out of the darkness of envy, hatred, suffering, false promises and Godlessness we seem to hear the cry: Is there no truth? Is there no such thing as the great power of good, charity, brotherly love and tolerance? Is the doctrine that it is man's birthright to be free, and adoring his great Creator, to so develop and mold his character that he shall be ready to take his place in that spiritual building not made with hands, to be overthrown?

The answer of Masonry to the first two questions is an emphatic "yes" and to the last a calm and vigorous dissent. Coming down to us from the dawn of civilization, gathering in its tireless quest for truth from the experiences and meditations of men, it exhorts its devotees to stand still and contemplate the miracle of miracles, the creation of the universe and all that is therein contained. The infinity of its extent, its order and grandeur, the tinted beauty of the flower, the patient stateliness of great trees, the majesty of granite peaks, the "still small voice" in man, and the loveliness of compassionate love, all bid US have no doubt, that we are not the children of chance and caprice, but creatures of an all-wise, omnipotent Father. An unknown poet has framed it in this fashion:

Our God has opened wide my eyes
To see the beauty of the skies.
The trees, the flowers that once seemed wondrous fair,
Have now an added glory, and the rare

Sweet drifting perfume of fresh budding things
Lifts up my heart, until on joy-filled wings
I soar above the dreams of mortal sense

And find in understanding recompense.

We agree, as did Aristotle, Plato and Newton, that we cannot understand the universe without God, who, according to Holy Writ: "Stretcheth out the north over the empty place, and hangeth the earth upon nothing." (Job 26:7.) In truth, the conclusion is so inescapable that Masonry, as its sole dogma, requires its acceptance. With its acceptance, however, we establish the existence of Truth, the principle of all created things.

We turn to inquire concerning the creature—man. Here we find no dogma, unless we can say that because we seek to impress through the medium of a universal language the thought that man is largely the architect and master workman of his own character, we dogmatically insist that man shall be free to become, through the evolution of his own internal life and with the aid of an almighty Parent, the master of his own destiny. Not dogmatically, but with overpowering persuasiveness, we assert that men were not born—some to rule and others to slave—but as children of a loving God, bound together by ties of brotherly love and affection. In our ceremonies we require no man to kneel to another as his superior. We assert only that he should kneel to his God for guidance in the affairs of life—in the spirit voiced by that eminent member of our Order—philosopher and sage, Benjamin Franklin—when on an historic occasion he addressed his fellow members of the Constitutional convention, in these words: "I have lived, Sir, a long time, and the longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth: That God governs in the affairs of men. And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without His notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without His aid? We have been assured, Sir, in the Sacred Writings, that 'except the Lord build the House they labor in vain that build it.' I firmly believe this; and I also believe that without His concurring aid we shall succeed in this political building no better than the builders of Babel. We shall be divided by our little partial, local interests; our projects will be confounded, and we ourselves shall become a reproach and a byword down to future ages. And what is worse, mankind may hereafter from this unfortunate instance despair of establishing governments by human wisdom and leave it to chance, war and conquest." The power of a great people is grounded in reverence, good, charity, brotherly love and affection. Consider the divine something in the great friendships of fable and history, Hercules and Hylas, David and Jonathan, Pylades and Orestes, Castor and Pollux, and Damon and Pythias. Contemplate the power of a few immortal sentences vibrating with the compassionate love of mankind to break the chains of despotism, free from slavery, or establish justice. Masonry believes that the greatest good it can render is to nourish and maintain this spiritual quality in our national life. It is our special function, not only within ourselves, but within our young, to erect a strong bulwark against the forces of hatred, materialism and bigotry. This is what we are and should be engaged in doing. How?

"There is a story told

In Eastern tents, when autumn nights grow cold,
And round the fire Mongol shepherds sit,
With grave response listening unto it;
Once on the errands of his mercy bent,
Buddha, the holy and benevolent,
Met a fellow monster, huge and fierce of look,
Whose awful voice the hills and forest shook.
'O Son of Peace,' the giant cried, 'Thy fate
Is sealed at last, and love shall yield to hate.'

The unarmed Buddha, looking with no trace
Of fear or anger, in the monster's face,
In pity said: 'Poor friend, even thee I love,'
Lo! as he spake, the skyfall terror sank
To handbreadth size; the huge abhorrence shrank
Into the form and fashion of a dove;
And where the thunder of its voice was heard,
Circling above him, sweetly sang the bird;
'Hate hath no harm for love,' so ran the song,
'And peace unweaponed conquers every wrong.' "

The quotation does not suggest that we should supinely relinquish principle. The greatness of Masonry lies in the fact that it is founded in Truth and maintains its principles. It is evidenced by the fact that though nations rise and fall, and the greatest works of man crumble into dust, Masonry survives to continue its quest and inspire man with ideals of equality and liberty and hope of immortality. Its adherents have become illustrious because in times of necessity they have undergone every "pain, peril" and "danger" to establish and protect the opportunity of every man to serve the purpose of his earthly existence. This is one of its principles—that man shall be privileged in his own way and not in another's to serve his God, and to work forward toward that state of perfection which will the better fit him to take his place in the life hereafter. If you please to put it in more prosaic words, that man shall have the right to make of his life not a mere drab picture of material existence, but a thing beautiful, crowded with constructive achievement, full of compassion and kindness, a picture to be remembered with joy by friend and kin. To be still more practical, it is interesting to observe from a survey of those who lead in enterprise in this country of ours what a great percentage embarked on their present vocation as a matter of necessity and in their bare feet, so to speak.

In this connection, let me make use of one further illustration. Several years ago I was sitting, meditating on the beauty of a grove of trees spread out before my eyes. For some reason, I observed that each tree was entirely different from every other. And my mind went back to boyhood days; when I would cut a limb suitable to be shaped into a sled runner, and then search for days, weeks and even months for another sufficiently similar to be fashioned to match the first. I could not resist the thought *"How much like man they are. Each has a different shape, different limbs, different form, yet each is a delight to the eye as is the composite whole. How impossible and foolish it would be to attempt to compress each majestic tree into a set mold and form."* Still more impossible it is to seek to restrict man to a given pattern.

A corollary to the foregoing principle is the fact that one man cannot wear the character vesture of another. He cannot have what he does not merit, by his own labor and experience. He who would share with us the wages of nourishment, inspiration and joy must become a laborer in the house. He cannot take spiritual verities by force, nor attempt it without bringing down upon himself catastrophic consequences. What he cannot do by force he cannot accomplish by fraud or deceit. There is just one avenue—that by earnest application and endeavor to divest himself of the vices and superfluities of life and to invest himself with the charitable and true.

Man, however, was not created to live unto himself, but as a member of society. The principle applicable to the growth and development of his life and character must be allowed to prevail with equal force with every other member. We discover through Masonry the true basis of fellowship. We learn that men, "the high and the low, the rich and the poor," are all created by the same almighty parent. We determine that one of the greatest services one can render to his Maker was voiced by the same Benjamin Franklin in his daily prayer, in these words: "O! Powerful Goodness! Bountiful Father!

Merciful Guide! Increase in me that wisdom which discovers my truest interest! Strengthen my resolutions to perform what that wisdom dictates! Accept my kind offices to Thy other children as the only return in my power for Thy continual favors to me!" Society so organized and governed rests upon the cement of tolerance and justice. It extends to the individual the right to be the master-workman of his own character, restrained only by the rule that every other member shall have a similar privilege. Resting on such a foundation classes and distinctions have no place, and bigotry and hatred are outlawed. Trouble comes when men insist that the principle be applied for their benefit, but refuse to apply it to themselves for the benefit of others.

As Masons, we are grateful and have a right to point with pride to the part played by our brethren of former years, in the sanguinary struggle to establish a government, the declared purpose of which was to protect these inalienable rights with which man is endowed by his Creator. To effect such a noble purpose, however, was not the work of a few years, but the culmination of the labors of liberty-loving men over hundreds—yes, thousands of years. We have enjoyed its blessings—perhaps at times unconscious of the toil, the sacrifice, and the bloodshed it entailed. Is it possible that, because we have not been denied its bounties and the beneficence of freedom, we have become blind to its worth? Such a state of affairs is possible.

From these observations, it follows that the individual is not static. As a Mason, he has been instructed in the progressive art. He must progress or go backward. As it is with the individual, so it is with society. For centuries man has craved to be supplied with power in order to be relieved

of drudgery. Power has been given to him in abundance. It seemed as though his energies were to be loosed for greater achievement in the mental field, the sciences, philosophy, literature and the arts. But like the children of Israel, when being delivered by Moses from the bondage of Egypt, we hear the plaint: "Would to God we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt when we sat by the flesh pots, and when we did eat bread to the full." The Israelites went forward to safety and their destiny. Whether we go forward or backward will depend upon our devotion to the ideals which have brought us thus far in our journey. It stands to reason that the genius which was about to deliver man from the bonds of drudgery will also carry him forward to his destiny, if we but have the fortitude to abide by those principles, which are as eternal as the Deity himself.

We dare not, however, prophesy the future. We know not whether another overturning must be endured before He comes whose right it is to reign. We have no way of forecasting whether ground won will be lost, to be retraced at a future time with great tribulation and bleeding footsteps, or whether we shall with faces toward the Light continue to go forward. Only this much do we know—that some day, either now or later, the Spirit of Masonry—the Truth— finding expression in the lives and character of our Brethren will rise triumphant to carry him forward to the place where justice and brotherly love prevail, and know no envy, no hatred, no tyranny.