

An Erring Brother

By Unknown

Next to the word Mother, no word in our language has more meaning and music in it than the word Brother. It is from above, and it reaches to the deep places of the heart. It is religion on its human side; and in it lies the hope of humanity. The highest dream of the prophets is of a time when men shall be Brothers.

When used Masonically, the word Brother has a depth and tenderness all its own, unique and is beautiful beyond words. It tells of a tie, mystical but mighty, which Masonry spins and weaves between man and man, which no one can define and few can resist. In time of sorrow it is a tether of sympathy and a link of loyalty.

Of course, like all other words, it is common enough, and may be glibly used without regard to its real meaning. Like the word God, it may be a coin worn smooth, or a flower faded. But when its meaning is actually and fully felt, no other word is needed among us, except on occasions of high Masonic Ceremony, when we add the word Worshipful, or some other term of title or rank.

No other word has a finer import or a more ample echo, expressive of the highest relationship in which dignity and devotion unite. If we are really Brothers, all the rest may go by the board, save for sake of ceremony. If we are not truly Brothers, all titles are empty and of no avail. For that reason, to omit the word Brother when speaking Masonically is not only a lack of courtesy, but shows a want of fineness of feeling.

What does the word Brother mean, Masonically? It means the adoption of a man into an inner circle of friendship, by a moral and spiritual tie as close and binding as the tie of common birth and blood between two brothers in a family. Nothing else, nothing less; and this implies a different attitude the one to the other – related not distant, united not opposed, natural and unrestrained – wherein are revealed what the old writers used to call "The Happy and Beneficial Effects of our Ancient and Honorable Institution."

Since this is so, surely we ought to exercise as much caution and judgment in bringing a new member into the Lodge as we do in inviting an outsider into the family circle. Carelessness here is the cause of most of our Masonic ills, frictions and griefs. Unless we are assured beyond all

reasonable doubt that a man is a brotherly man to whom Masonry will appeal, and who will justify our choice, we ought not to propose his name or admit him to our fellowship.

Still, no man is perfect; and the Lodge is a moral workshop in which the rough Ashlar is to be polished for use and beauty. If the Lodge had been too exacting, none of us would have gained admission. At best we must live together in the Lodge, as elsewhere, by Faith, Hope and Charity; else Masonry will be a failure. The Brotherly Life may be difficult, but it is none the less needful. Our faith in another way may be repelled, or even shattered – what then?

Nothing in life is sadder than the pitiful moral breakdowns of good men, their blunders and brutalities. Who knows his own heart, or what he might do under terrible trial or temptation? Often enough qualities appear or emerge of which neither man himself or his friends were aware, and there is a moral wreck. Some "Defect of Will or Taint of Blood," some hidden yellow streak, some dark sin shows itself, and there is disaster. A man highly respected and deeply loved goes down suddenly like a tree in a storm, and we discover under the smooth bark that the inside was rotten. What shall we do? Of course, in cases of awful crime the way is plain, but we have in mind the erring Brother who does injury to himself, his Brother or the Lodge. An old Stoic teacher gave a good rule, showing us that much depends on the handle with which we take hold of the matter. If we say, "My Brother has INJURED me," it will mean one thing. If we say, "My BROTHER has injured Me," it will mean another; and that is what the Brotherly Life means, if it means anything.

Every Master of a Lodge knows how often he is asked to arraign a Brother, try him and expel him from the Fraternity. It is easy to be angry and equally easy to be unjust. If he is a wise Master, he will make haste slowly. There is need of tact, patience; and, above all sympathy – since all good men are a little weak and a little strong, a little good and a little bad; and anyone may lose his way, befogged by passion or bewitched by evil. It is a joy to record that Masons, for the most part, are both gentle and wise in dealing with a Brother who has stumbled along the way. Masonic charity is not a myth; it is one of the finest things on earth.

What shall we do? If we see a Brother going wrong in Masonry, or in anything else – "Spoiling his Work," as the old Masons used to say – well, we must take him aside and talk to him gently, man to man, Brother to Brother; and show him the right way. He may be ignorant, weak or even ugly of spirit – driven by some blind devil as all of us are apt to be – and if so our tact and Brotherly kindness may be tested and tried; but more often than otherwise we can win him back to sanity.

Have you heard a tale about a Brother, a suggestion of a doubt, an innuendo about his character, some hearsay story not to his credit? If so, did you stand up for him, ask for proof, or invite suspension of judgment until the facts could be heard; remembering that it is your duty as a Mason to defend a Brother in his absence? Such things are seldom said in his presence. It is not

fair to tell him what is being said and learn his side of the tale? If we fail in our duty in such matters we fail of being a true Brother.

When we have learned the truth and have to face the worst, what then? Long ago we knew an old Mason, long since gone to the Great Lodge, who was chided by a Brother for continuing to trust a man they both knew was taking advantage of the kindness shown him. The old man replied:

"Yes, but you never know; I may touch the right chord in his heart yet. He is not wholly bad, and some day, perhaps when I'm dead and gone, he will hear the music and remember." And he did!

Hear the music? Ah, if we would hear it we must listen and wait, after we have touched "the right chord." And if the right chord is "In Us" something in him will respond, if he be not utterly dead of soul! If he does respond, then you will have gained a friend who will stick closer than a Brother. If he does not respond – and, alas, sometimes they do not – then we must admit, with a heart bowed down, that we have done our best, and failed. Some inherent failing, some blind spot, has led him astray, dividing him from us by a gulf we cannot bridge.

So a Mason should treat his Brother who goes astray; not with bitterness, nor yet with good-natured easiness, nor with worldly indifference, nor with philosophic coldness; but with pity, patience and loving-kindness. A moral collapse is a sickness, loss, dishonor in the immortal part of man. It is the darkest disaster, worse than death, adding misery to guilt. We must deal faithfully but tenderly, firmly but patiently with such tragedies.

It is facts such as these which show us what charity, in a far deeper sense than monitory gifts, really means. It is as delicate as it is difficult in that we are all men of like passions and temptations. We all have that within us which, by a twist of perversion, might lead to awful ends. Perhaps we have done acts, which, in proportion to the provocation, are less excusable than those of a Brother who grieves us by his sin. "Judge not lest ye yourselves be judged." Truly it was a wise saying, not less true today than when the old Greek uttered it long ago, "Know Thyself." Because we do not know ourselves, it behooves us to put ourselves under the spell of all the influences God is using for the making of men, among which the Spirit of Masonry is one of the gentlest, wisest and most benign. If we let it have its way with us it will build us up in virtue, honor and charity; softening what is hard and strengthening what is weak.

If an erring Brother must be condemned, he must also be deeply pitied. God pities him; Christ died for him; Heaven waits to welcome him back with joy. He has done himself a far deeper injury than he has done anyone else. In pity, prayer and pain let our hearts beat in harmony with all the powers God is using for his recovery. "There remaineth Faith, Hope and Charity; but the greatest of these is Charity."

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