

For The Good Of The Order

By Joseph Fort Newton

(The substance of an address by Bro. Newton, Educational Director; at the Annual Meeting of The Masonic Service association, Washington, D.C. Oct. 29th, 1923; following the report of the Executive Commission.)

After listening so intently to this remarkable Report, no one wishes to hear a long speech from anybody. But, in as much as the Report referred so kindly to me, perhaps I may be allowed a personal word, if only to tell in what mood I take up the work, and the spirit in which I hope to do it.

First, let me tell a story. During the American Civil War a young Captain in the army of the South was taken prisoner and brought up the Mississippi to Rock Island. The northern climate was severe on the southern men, proof of which can be found in the files of the War Department. The young Captain fell ill, desperately ill. He made himself known as a Mason to an officer of the prison. The officer took him out of the prison to his home, and nursed him back to life. When the War ended he put money in his pocket and gave him a little pistol to protect himself on his way back to his southern home. That young Captain was my father!

So, as far back as I can remember, I have had a great admiration for a Fraternity whose spirit could soften the horrors of battle and mitigate the lot of a prisoner of war. By the same token, I hope I have done a little for Freemasonry in return, trying feebly to repay a measureless obligation. For the same reason I should like to do more in its behalf before the day ends.

Since those far off years all of us have lived through a Great War, and no man can pass through such an ordeal and be the same man he was before. Something died in me and was buried with the boys I buried in Flanders – five hundred and twenty-seven of them in one day. All bitterness, bigotry and all ill-will if I ever had any toward any race or creed, lie dead and buried with the War. Never have I had a deeper pity for my race, a greater love for my country, or a firmer faith that Freemasonry can do something for the re-building of the broken brotherhood of the world that nothing else can do.

It was in the old gray city of London, at that time an arsenal and a hospital, that I first heard of the organization of the Masonic Service Association of the United States. It was one of the best bits of news that came in the days when good news was rare. When I learned of the basis on

which the Association was organized, and the program it meant to carry through, it was like a dream come true. Now, at last, I felt that American Masonry had begin to realize both its opportunity and its obligations; and I had a great longing to have a part, however small, in such a work.

The purpose of the association. as I understood it, sought to fulfill three basic principles of Freemasonry. Brotherly Love, Relief and truth – the doing of good and the spreading of light in the spirit of good will. Living under the shadow of a vast tragedy – trying to think and pray in the rhythm of its guns – it seemed to me that what the world needed was more Light, more Love, More Understanding; and that is what it needs today.

Our program is two-fold, first to bring American Freemasonry together in cooperative fellowship and service in a time of need and calamity; and second, to educate Masons in Masonry that the gentle, kindly light which shines on our Altar may find its way through our lives and through our lodges into the world of partisan strife and sectarian feud where it is needed. What we want is a service that educates and an education that serves.

The whole principle of Freemasonry is that "Brotherhood of Man begins with the Manhood of the Brother." It seeks to build men, and then to make them Brothers and Builders. Any other kind of brotherhood is weak, if not futile, either a flabby sentimentalism or a calculating selfishness. Masonry is made up of strong men, picked men – they cannot be picked too carefully – sworn and trained to make righteousness and good will prevail. By that very fact a great responsibility rests upon us, which we cannot escape even if we desired to do so. Whatever needs to be done in any community the Masons ought to be the leaders in doing it, because they are Builders. Every Masonic lodge ought to be a social and civic center, where designs are drawn upon the Trestleboard for the common good, regardless of sect or party.

At first glance, our program may seem to be rather academic and high-brow, but it can be modified and adapted to our real needs and problems. No man, no set of men, can make such a program outright; it is by doing things that we learn what needs to be done and how best to do it. If we work together wisely, keeping the human touch and the spiritual vision, our experiments will ripen into a fruitful experience of how the spirit and principles of freemasonry can be practically applied to the life and service of our generation; as Washington and Franklin wrought its genius into the organic law of our new Republic.

Frankly, my first thought is not of the men who are already Masonic students. We need them, of course, and I believe they will rally to our help, as they did when we founded the Research Society. No, we are thinking of the throngs of young men – shock-headed boys, God Bless them! – who are crowding into our Temples all over the land. We welcome their youth, their energy, their enthusiasm; but we want them to be Masons, not merely members. We want them to know something about Masonry, not only its ritual, but what the ritual means, and what Masonry can do and ought to do in the World. Otherwise, as is so often the case, they will drift

away and become "Bread and Butter Masons;" attending "The Big Meets and the Big Eats," using the Masonic Apron for a napkin. Such men ought to have a special Apron of their own, adorned with a knife and fork as emblems!

Perhaps it is not altogether their fault – the lodge that simply makes Masons, and does not teach Masonry, does only half its work, or does its work only half way. If we do not know Masonry ourselves, if we do not know how to teach it to our young initiates, if our lodges become simply mills grinding out degrees; our freemasonry will sink to the level of a club – useful as such but in no way unique – losing its original purpose and power, and its great opportunity in our own day.

Always the first principle of education is to excite curiosity, to awaken interest; hence the plan of this Association, a few items of which I wish to mention without going far into detail. The moving-picture program seeks to make use of one of the greatest arts of our time to enlist interest in Freemasonry, by showing what it means when actually worked out in modern life. In the same way, the M.S.A. National Masonic Library will bring the best thought of the Craft within the reach of lodges and members; and our proposed journal, "The Master Mason," will be a medium for the exchange of ideas, plans, methods and good-fellowship; and a means of learning the present state of Freemasonry in all lands, its aspirations and its difficulties.

Besides, we hope to enter the strangely neglected field of fiction, using another great art in the service of the Craft. Hitherto, except for the stories of Brother Kipling, we have had few Masonic stories. The men of the Craft, like all other Americans, read stories, and it will be good news to know that one of the greatest of American novelists has promised to write, as only he can write, the story of Freemasonry in the American Revolution. When our young men read that story their blood will tingle and their hearts will beat faster as they see and realize what a part Masonry had in the creation of our Republic. Also, there will be short stories dramatizing the meaning of Masonry and its creative influence in the practical life as we know and live it.

Masonic research, as I understand it, means to search again for something we may have forgotten or overlooked. There are treasures of truth in our Freemasonry, and sources of power we have not yet dreamed of much less used. We need to know the past of Masonry in order to keep us true to its spirit, its purpose and its methods; and I think I have shown a not unworthy interest in the history and archeology of the Craft. But we must also make research into the present meaning, power, and application of Freemasonry, the better to know what our great order of Builders ought to do and can do for the making of a greater and better America. The philanthropies of the Craft are munificent and its opportunities are magnificent!

Brethren, I believe in America as I believe in God, and I know that as Freemasonry did a great work in the past of America, so can it do a still greater work in the future of our country. With the utmost respect and regard for other lands and peoples, our care is for America – our America, God's America – to keep it true to its high, heroic tradition. Three Ruffians threaten

the safety and sanctity of America- racial rancor, religious bigotry and a disintegrating spirit of lawlessness!

Here is our challenge and our opportunity, lest our Temple of Liberty and Fraternity be injured or destroyed before it is completed and dedicated – for it is not yet complete. Racial rancor is a thing slithered with blood and the mother of feuds and wars. Religious bigotry is one of the most horrible things in history. Its story is a tragedy too terrible to tell. As for lawlessness, it strikes at the Altar of liberty, undermines all our institutions, and opens the floodgates of anarchy. These Ruffians, if they have they way, will wreck Freemasonry, as they came near doing long ago, and they will ruin America.

Freemasonry, by virtue of its spirit and its teachings, can do for America what no other Fraternity can do. Without entering into political debates or sectarian disputes, as in the past so in the future, let us build upon the foundations laid by our fathers, and make America what its poets and prophets have dreamed it should be; and to have even a little part in such a work is honor enough – IT IS HONOR ENOUGH!

STB - December 1923