

ACACIA LEAVES AND EASTER LILIES

April brings us to Easter Day - the festival of Memory and Hope. That a day in spring should be set apart in praise of the victory of Life is in accord with the fitness of things, as if the seasons of the soul were akin to the season of the year. It unites faith with life; it links the fresh buds of spring with the ancient pieties of the heart. It finds in Nature, with its rhythm of winter and summer, a ritual of hope and joy.

So run the records of all times. Older than our era, Easter has been a day of feast and song in all lands and among all peoples. By a certain instinct man has found in the seasons a symbol of his faith, the blossoming of his spirit attuned to the wonder of the awakening of the earth from the white death of winter. A deep chord in him answers to the ever-renewed resurrection of Nature, and that instinct is more to be trusted than all philosophy. For in Nature there is no death, but only living and living again.

Something in the stir of spring, in the reviving earth, in the tide of life overflowing the world, in the rebirth of the flowers, begets an unconscious, involuntary renewal of faith in the heart of man, refreshing his hope. So he looks into the face of each new spring with a heart strangely glad, and strangely sad too, touched by tender memories of springs gone by never to return, softened by thoughts of "those who answer not, however we may call."

Truly, it is a day of Hope and Courage in the heart of man. Hope and Courage we have for the affairs of daily life; but here is a Hope that leaps beyond the borders of the world, and a Courage that faces eternity. For that Easter stands, in its history, its music, its returning miracle of spring - for the putting off of the tyranny of time, the terror of the grave, and the triumph of the flesh, and the putting on of immortality. Men can work with a brave heart and endure many ills if he feels that the good he strives for here, and never quite attains, will be won elsewhere.

There is something heroic, something magnificent in the refusal of a man to let death have the last word. Time out of mind, as far back as we can trace human thought - in sign or symbol - man has refused to think of the grave as the coffin lid of a dull and mindless world descending upon him at last. It was so in Egypt five thousand years ago, and is so today. At the gates of the tomb he defies the Shadow he cannot escape, and asserts the worth of his soul and its high destiny. Surely this mighty faith is its own best proof and prophecy, since man is a part of Nature, and what is deepest in him is what nature has taught him to hope.

For some of us Easter has other meanings than those dug up from the folklore of olden time. Think how you will of the lovely and heroic figure of Jesus, it is none the less His day, dedicated to the pathos of His Passion and the wonder of His Personality. For some of us His Life of Love is the one everlasting romance in this hard old world, and its ineffable tenderness seems to blend naturally with the thrill of springtime, when the finger of God is pointing to the new birth of the earth. No Brother will deny us the joy of weaving Easter lilies with Acacia leaves, in celebration of a common hope.

The legend of Hiram and the life of Jesus tell us the same truth; one in fiction and the other in fact. Both tragedies are alike profoundly simple, complete and heartbreaking - each a symbol not only of the victory of man over death, but of his triumph over the stupidity and horror of evil in himself and in the world. In all the old mythologies, the winter comes because the ruffian forces of the world strike down and slay the gentle spirit of summer; and this dark tragedy is reflected in the life of man - making a mystery no mortal can solve, save as he sees it with courage and hope.

Jesus was put to death between two thieves outside the city gate. The Master Builder was stricken down in the hour of His Glory, His Prayer choked in His Own Blood. Lincoln was shot on Good Friday, just as the temple of Unity and Liberty was about to be dedicated. Each was the victim of sinister, cunning, brutal, evil force - here is the tragedy of our race, repeated in every age and land, as appalling as it is universal, and no man can fathom its mystery.

Yet, strangely enough, the very shadow which seems to destroy faith, and make it seem futile and pitiful, is the fact which created the high, heroic faith of humanity, and keeps it alive. Love, crucified by Hate; high character slain by low cunning! Death victorious over life - man refuses to accept that as the final meaning of the world. He demands justice in the name of God and his own soul. The Master Builder is betrayed and slain; his enemies are put to death - that satisfies the sense of justice. Jesus dies with a prayer of forgiveness on His lips; Judas makes away with himself - and the hurt is partly healed.

But is that all? On the mount of Crucifixion, by the outworking of events, goodness and wickedness met the same muddy fate - is that the meaning of the world? The Master Builder and his slayers are alike buried - is that the end? Are we to think that Jesus and Judas sleep in the same dust, all values erased, all issues settled in the great silence? In the name of reason it cannot be true, else chaos were the crown of cosmos, and mud more mighty than mind!

When man, by his insight and affirmation of his soul, holds it true, despite all seeming contradiction, that virtue is victorious over brutal evil, and Life is Lord of Death, and that the soul is as eternal as the moral order in which it lives, the heart of the race has found the truth. Argument is unnecessary; the great soul of the world we call God is just. Here is the basis of all religion and the background of all philosophy. From the verdict of the senses and the logic of the mind, man appeals to the justice of God, and finds peace.

Thou wilt not leave us in the dust; Thou maddest man, he knows not why, He thinks he was not made to die; And thou has made him; Thou art just.

With what overwhelming impressiveness this faith is set forth in the greatest Degree of Freemasonry, the full meaning and depth of which we have not yet begun to fathom, much less realize. Edwin Booth was right when he said that the Third degree of Masonry is the profoundest, the simplest, the most heart-gripping tragedy known among men. Where else are all the elements of tragedy more perfectly blended in a scene which shakes the heart and makes it stand still? It is pathetic, It is confounding. Everything seems shattered and lost. Yet, somehow, we are not dismayed by it, because we are made to feel that there is a Beyond - the victim is rather set free from life than deprived of it.

Without faith in the future, where the tangled tragedies of this world are made straight, and its weary woe is healed, despair would be our fate. By this faith men live and endure in spite of ills. Its roots go deeper than argument, deeper than dogma, deeper than reason, as deep as infancy and old age, as deep as love and faith - older than history - that the power which weaves in silence, robes of white for the lilies or red for the rose, will the much more clothe our spirits with a moral beauty that shall never fade.

But there is a still deeper meaning in the Third Degree of Masonry, if we have eyes to see and ears to hear. It is not explained in the lectures; it is hardly hinted at in the lodge. Yet it is as clear as day, if we have insight. The Degree ends not in a memorial, but in the manifestation of the Eternal Life. Raised from the dead level to a living perpendicular by the strong grip of faith, the Master Builder lives by the power of an endless life. That is to say, Masonry symbolically initiates us into Eternal Life here and now, makes us citizens of eternity in time and bids us live and act accordingly. Here is the deepest secret Masonry has to teach - that we are immortal here and now; that death is nothing to the soul; that eternity is today.

When shall we become that which we are? When shall we, who are sons of the Most High, born of His Love and Power, made in His Image, and endowed with His Deathless Life, discover who we are, whence we came, and whither we tend, and live a free, joyous, triumphant life which belongs of right to immortal spirits! Give a man an hour to live, and you put him in a cage. Extend it to a day, and he is freer. Give him a year, and he moves in larger orbit and makes his plans. Let him know that he is a citizen of an eternal world, and he is free indeed, a master of life and time and death - a Master Mason.

Thus Acacia leaves and Easter lilies unite to give us the hint, if not the key to a higher heroism and cheer, even "the glory of going on and still to be;" a glory which puts new meaning and value into these our days and years - so brief at their longest, so broken at their best, their achievements so transient, and so quickly forgotten. Sorrows come, and heartache, and loneliness unutterable, when those we love fall into the great white sleep; but the sprig of Acacia will grow in our hearts, if we cultivate it, watering it the while with our tears, and at last it will be not a symbol but a sacrament in the house of our pilgrimage.

What to you is Shadow, to Him is Day, And the end He Knoweth; Thy spirit goeth; The steps of Faith Fall on a seeming void, and find A rock beneath.