

AT MIDNIGHT

In every Lodge are the counterparts of those who walk through these few pages. In every man's heart may be the thoughts here set down. Lucky is he who thinks them - in time!

Never did I expect to write these words, but the Editor of The Short Talk Bulletin persuaded me that it should be a pleasure and surely was a duty. With some reluctance. I attempt to put on paper something wholly intangible; as difficult to describe as a perfume or a symphony.

It is a small town in which I live, with only one Lodge. In the past I have not gone as often as I should; for years I have too often been "too busy." But this night I did go to Lodge, and met many old friends and had a good time. After Lodge I drove the Secretary to his home - he lives near me - and was just saying good night when I missed my pocket book. I had it in the Lodge room, since I had gone into it for money to pay my dues. So I hoped it was still in the hall.

"Bill, sorry, but I'll have to ask you to go back to the Lodge," I said. "I've dropped my pocket book. There's a reasonable sum in it. I'll need it tomorrow . . ."

"Indeed, then, I won't go back!" he answered. "I'm tired: Take my keys and let yourself in. Send 'em back tomorrow."

He handed over his keys and I drove back to the Temple.

We are a little community and except for a very few alleged "hot spots" down town, we are early-to-bedders. The streets were dark. There was a light in Doctor Prendegast's office, and here and there some usually, late radio fan still showed a light, but in the main it was a town asleep through which I drove. The Lodge hall, too, was black. I let myself in with the big key and lit matches to see my way up the familiar steps - steps worn with the tread of many a good man and true who had gone that way before.

My little Lodge is neither large nor wealthy. We own a substantial equity, in our building, but most of our funds go to paying off the debt. It was no palatial Lodge room I entered at midnight. But neither is it a poor Lodge room; it is decently carpeted and clean; many an old picture adorns its walls; pictures of departed Past Masters; photographs of scenes of corner stone layings and banquets; souvenirs sent us from our brethren sojourning abroad. Our Altar is home-made - dear old Brother Clifton made it, many, many years ago. It is still a good piece of craftsmanship, although one side is cracked and - alas! - the scars of some misplaced cigarette butts, carelessly laid upon it when Lodge has been at refreshment show black on the edges.

My hand sought the buttons which control the lights. It is long since I operated them. There are five. One for the Letter G; one for the Altar lights; one for the north side and one for the south side of the Lodge; one for the Secretary's and Treasurer's desk lights. I forgot which was which. I pressed two, thinking to light the room that I might search for my missing pocket book.

The Letter G and the Altar lights glowed in response.

I stood just inside the door, struck with what seemed to my surprised eyes - which had expected the whole room to be illuminated - with the very look of the empty Lodge room lighted as it is during one part of a degree.

It is with some diffidence that I attempt to tell just what happened, or seemed to happen. I am not a "psychic." I do not "dream dreams and see visions." I am a practical man of small affairs. concerned with running a business, raising a family, taking a very small and mundane part in the mundane and small affairs of a little community. Mysticism, spiritualism, clairvoyance and the like are foreign to my thought and makeup. Doubtless all that I seemed to hear and see was but a reflection of vivid memories, induced by the unexpected lighting I had inadvertently produced, the silence and emptiness of the scene which is usually filled with men, the hour of the night.

The Great Light was closed, the square and compasses laid beside it. Hardly knowing what I did, certainly not why I did It, I opened the Book and laid the Square and Compasses upon it as I had seen them those long years ago when as a Master Mason I was brought to light.

I stood silent for some time, enjoying what I saw, though it was but an empty room. But was it empty? Did I see, or did I just think in memory of a time long gone, when I beheld the Lights for the first time?

Walter Davis was Master then, tall, shambling in his walk, his face deeply lined, his voice rather monotonous. But his ritual, as I grew to know, was letter perfect. I seemed to see him standing there, opposite me, and in his eyes a look I had forgotten, but which now reminded me, as with a reproach, of all he had hoped from me, and how little of it I had given him. An earnest Mason, Worshipful Master Davis. A man rather ignorant, as knowledge goes; a humble man in a humble station of life. Being Master of his Lodge was the greatest responsibility which had ever come to him. He held his leadership as something high and holy, and to the best of his heart and mind, he lived up to the responsibilities. We have had many a better Master, but never one who put more heart into it, or was more impressive, with his utter belief, his utter earnestness. It did something to him, being Master - I saw it again, in his face.

"In continuation of my brotherly love and esteem, I now present you my right hand and with it . . ." The words came back to me. I saw him there - dead these many years - his old black coat with the rusty spots baggily about him, his hair rumped, but his eyes boring into mine with all his heart behind them ...

I reached for the spectral hand which was not there. Did something press mine in an old, half forgotten grip? Or did my memory play tricks with me?

Dead these many years! I looked around. There were so many dead - so many whose footfalls I had heard echoing in the little plain Lodge room, which there echo no more. The oldest Past Master with the odd name - dear, dear old Brother Orange. Ninety-three he was when he died. Installed Treasurer for the fiftieth time. And I had installed him! He smiled at me, the gentle, lovely smile of the old, old man with the young heart. Yes, there beside him stood Walter Ferris -

Walter often had an arm under the old man's to help him. He too, smiled. In their faces I could see the love of Masonry which had meant so much to both.

At

what did they smile, these brethren of the long ago? At me? I looked to the right. Surely my eyes played me false in the dimness of that corner. We have a splendid secretary. We call him Zimmy. He is friend and brother and aid and counselor to all. But it was not Zimmy's young face, there behind the Secretary's desk. It was Ham's - Ham of the mighty vitality; Ham who had made our little Lodge a power for a while; Ham who made a thousand friends and some not so friendly by the vigor and force and domination of his character. My Lodge was "his" Lodge during his life. Every one spoke of it as "Ham's Lodge." He ruled it. He ruled Masters. He ruled the brethren. And did it with a smile and a story, a quip and a jest and an overbearing determination to get his own way ...

"All clear of the books, Worshipful!" How many times at annual meetings in the long, long ago I had heard that triumphant announcement! No one dropped N. P. D. NO ONE. Because Ham wouldn't let them drop themselves. He argued, he cajoled, he threatened, he traveled from house to house and office to office, and the brethren paid, or else! No one knew what horrible penalty Ham would have inflicted on the brother who didn't for none ever dared hold back his dues to find out!

Now Ham is one with his fathers but - he too smiled at me; a friendly smile; a smile that told anew what his Lodge had meant to Ham.

Who is that gentle shade who stands near the south, shaking his head sorrowfully? Louie - dear, dear Louie, of the gentle heart, the prejudiced mind, the giving spirit. A ritualist first, last, all the time: a misplaced comma was a tragedy, a misplaced word in a degree a crime! And how he labored over his careless brethren, who, as officers, did not do as well as they should - what midnight oil he burned and how he lived breathed, drank and ate ritual! Now he shook his head. Evidently I had made a mistake. A mistake in what? Was I giving or receiving a degree? I was confused. Louie died a painful, lingering, sad death. It took him a year to die of a slowly creeping incurable paralysis that crept up, up, up . . . we grew to be good friends in that year. I was his Junior Warden when he was Master. During the long months in the hospital, I did not, thank God, forget to visit him often. There was no reproach in the smile which tells me with the shaking head that I have said "on" when I should have said "upon" - a very gentle spirit, Louie. It is good to have known a man to whom Masonry was the very breath of life. It is good to see him again.

Behind him is one not good to look upon. Senior Warden he was - now he lies in a coffin and there is dark blood in his crushed face. He died horribly in a terrible accident. I was a pall bearer at his funeral. The Lodge took care of his children. I see him, now and always, as he lay before us that day, although the undertaker had done his best-crushed, crushed ...

Down the Lodge strides a thin figure. White headed, white mustached, austere, cold yet cordial - mighty George, one time a Grand Lodge officer. Trustee of the Lodge, his annual reports were

always reproofs; we spent too much on entertainment! We should save more! Indeed, we would not have our substantial equity in our building had it not been for his stern integrity, his tireless work, his aloof, dignified but forceful demands that we save, save, save . . . He is dead these twenty years and yet he lives in his works. He is here, now, with his report in his hand.

I do not want to hear it. I turn my eyes to the north side of the Lodge. There sits Lurtin - Past Grand Master Lurtin, Chairman of the Jurisprudence Committee of the Grand Lodge. Dignity no man ever had to equal his. Power in the Lodge no man ever had to equal his - he was the only brother Ham Smith could not twist about his fingers. He and mighty George. But Brother Lurtin was a kindly man, with a helpful word for a young Mason, and he, too, smiles at me across the years and the veil that flaps fitfully between now and eternity. I see him through that veil, and I sense that his Masonry still means everything to him.

Who comes now, a spectral shade, to join the company of shades to which I am host, or who are hosts to the chance midnight visitor? Who but John Wilson - a brother beloved in the dear dead days that come not back forever. Always present, John. Always wielding his quiet influence. If there was charity to do. John did it. If there was a gift to be made. John proposed it. If there was word of commendation to be spoken, it came from John. A Mason in his heart as well as in his mind, John walks from beyond the shadows into the dim radiance of the Lesser Lights and I, who have not even thought of him for a quarter of a century, smile across the unbridgeable gap between us. It is good, good to remember. Why, it was John who helped me get my catechism! It was John who examined me in open Lodge - John was the Louie of his day. And now he comes back - from where? - to give me silent greeting across the miles and years and the dread barrier he has passed and I shall pass ...

The room fills. One by one the men I have known, and loved, and to whom I have said goodbye, come out of nowhere into the silent room. There is no spoken word. And yet we speak together, they and I - they who know all there is to know; I who know nothing. We speak, but what we say I cannot tell, for the speaking is not in words but only in the thoughts that have no words. But I understand. Do they, I wonder, now understand me?

I draw my hand across my eyes. This is not real, I tell myself. I am awake. This is the Lodge room. It is empty. I am alone. No one is here - no dread shades are about me. But it will not work. For there with the impish grin that was always a delight to see, is John May - John May, Tiler for all the years I was a young Mason. John May, of no education and great wit; John May who had little schooling and could make as clever a speech as ever was heard at a gathering of Masons; John May who was proud of his "swo-ard" as he always called it, who knew every man in the Lodge and could call the names of those who had not been there for ten years; a Tiler of Tilers! It was from him I had my earliest lesson in Freemasonry. Coming for my Fellowcraft degree I asked him a question. He drew himself up and said "I cannot tell you. I cannot, you know, yet talk with you as a Master Mason!" How small I felt and what a great man he seemed, this Tiler who could let me in or keep me out and not talk to me as a Master Mason . .

John May dropped dead in his house at Christmas. He was still smiling when they picked him up. Masonry taught him to smile his way through life, through the Tiler's work and into the hearts of hundreds. We shall not see his like again . . .

A goodly company of men and Masons. The East is crowded with them. The side lines are filled with them. Brethren whose faces I know but whose names are gone; brethren of another day, another life. Brethren of the days when I was young and enthusiastic and new to Masonry, with all the world before me, a lance in arm to fight with, and the elan of youth with which to charge windmills and remake the world and Masonry nearer to the heart's desire ...

Now I am old, old. I have not gone to Lodge as often as I should. As I think it, the smiles are wiped from the faces of those my friends who were. They know something that I do not. It seems to me that they try to tell me. And I, alas, can not understand, for they are dead and I live - or is it I who am dead and they who live?

Haltingly, I approach the Altar to fall upon my knees before it, to bury my aching eyes in hands that tremble. I do not know what I pray except that it is for understanding - Oh, yes, and gratitude that I have had Masonry, and that so many goodly brethren have walked beside me for a little space . .

When I arise the hall is empty. I know that this is no vision that I saw. It is not of fact. but of fancy that my thoughts have built the scene . . .

My pocketbook was found and returned to me next day.

I have not missed a Lodge meeting since.

For it cannot be long, now, until I go to join those who that night came to visit me. And I would see them smile again, when next I greet them.