

GIFTS OF THE MAGI

“. . . and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.” (Matthew 21:11)

“A young man asks, ‘What will I receive from Freemasonry if I become a member? My father was a Mason, and I’d like to be, but I want to know what the Order has to offer me.’”

Freemasonry “offer” nothing. The petitioner requests; the Lodge may, or may not, give. But the question is entirely legitimate; any young man sufficiently thoughtful to want to know something of the Craft which he expresses a desire to join, is good material for a Lodge, and should receive a satisfying answer.

The first gift of Freemasonry is that of standing in the community. To pass the investigation of a competent committee, and the secret and unanimous ballot of a Lodge, is to be stamped with the earmark of a good character. Freemasons have an enviable reputation. To become one is to share in that reputation, since acceptance as a Freemason marks recognition of character by men well thought of in the community. Cicero said: “To disregard what the world thinks of us is not only arrogant, but utterly shameless.” If his Freemasonry makes the world think better of a man, it is worth all it may cost in time and effort.

The young man who becomes a Freemason has the privilege of giving charity and relief to those less fortunate, in a way which is beautiful, because it is secret and unselfish. Addison wrote:

“Charity is a virtue of the heart and not of the hands.” As all know who are concerned in Masonic charity, it is truly of the giving spirit.

The young Mason has also the privilege of receiving charity and relief for himself, should he need it. It is to be emphasized that Freemasonry is not primarily a charity and relief organization. These are incidental to her practice and a result of her teachings. No Freemason has a right to either, but he has certainty of receiving both, should he, or those dear to him, be in need.

This gift of the Craft makes a greater appeal to men as they grow older. To the young man just facing the world, with the future stretching hopefully before him, the possibility of needing the comfort of a hand on his shoulder, a check for a ton of coal, a helping hand for a penniless widow, seem remote. But he receives the precious privilege of giving to those who have traveled further on life’s pathway.

Gifts of Freemasonry are the opportunities she provides for service other than charity; service in friendships, service to the ill, service to brethren in trouble, service to the Lodge. Nor care that the service to be rendered may not be great. Wordsworth sang: “Small service is true service while it lasts The daisy, by the shadow that it casts, Protects the lingering dewdrop from the sun.”

As all know who have lived, service to others generates the greatest happiness. He who lives for himself alone, lives miserably. He who lives somewhat for others finds that peace which passeth understanding.

The Ancient Craft gives her sons a liberal education in the difficult art of character building. World activities are founded upon ramifications of character. We travel in a railroad train at dizzying speeds, secure in the belief that the engine is controlled by a man of "character;" sober, reliable, industrious, careful, cautious and able. We never see him; we do not know him personally; but we believe that he could not be where he is, had he not demonstrated character. Business is done on credit, which is only faith in a man's word. We accept as money a piece of paper with a name on it, certain that the character of the maker of the check and the officials of the bank, will secure to us the money for which the checks calls for. We have faith in the character of the doctor, our lawyer and the judge in the court. Character is the foundation of our civilization. Freemasonry offer such opportunities for the development and the increase of the stature of character as can be found nowhere else in like amount.

"Many men build as cathedrals were built, the part nearest the ground finished first; but that part which soars towards heaven, the turrets and spires, forever incomplete." Beecher's simile need not apply to Freemasonry; he who does not finish his turret and his spire of character in the Fraternity fails because he will not, not because he cannot.

To the Freemason the Lodge offers the gift of intelligent patriotism. Not the "one hundred per cent American, America first and the devil take the hindmost" patriotism of the demagogue, but the real patriotism of genuine love of country, which comes to those who genuinely try to make their country lovable. The history of Freemasonry in this nation is inextricably intermingled with the stirring events and the deathless deeds of literally hundreds of Masonic patriots without whose devotion the United States might not have been a nation. Paul Revere, Warren, Washington, Marshall, Jefferson, Lafayette and Franklin - pages might be filled with immortal names of great men in our history who have known and loved and used the Ancient Craft for the betterment of the nation.

"For how can man die better

Than facing fearful odds

For the ashes of his fathers

And the Temples of his Gods?"

It is this patriotism which Freemasonry teaches; we may not keep the bridge with old Horatius, but in the Lodge we can and do learn to reverence the "ashes of our fathers" and the Temples of our liberties and our traditions.

Freemasonry gives to her sons the gentle gift of fellowship. Our fiends are those we know well, who love us, perhaps, as much because of our faults as in spite of them. Those with whom we fellowship we may see only once, and yet, because of our common bond, we know them as men

who might become friends, did opportunity offer; it is to be hoped that they fell thus of us. The spirit of fellowship in a Lodge cannot elsewhere be found. We come to the tiled door a stranger; when passed within we are not among strangers, but brethren. William Morris phrased it thus:

“Forsooth, brethren, fellowship is heaven and lack of fellowship is hell; fellowship is life and lack of fellow-ship is death; and the deeds that ye do upon earth, it is for fellowship’s sake that ye do them.”

Freemasonry stops not with fellowship. She gives the gracious gift of the most favorable opportunity to make friends which can come to any man.

“If a man does not make new acquaintances as he advances through life he will soon find himself left alone. A man, Sir, should keep his friendships in constant repair.”

Samuel Johnson’s philosophy might have been written of his who finds the Lodge the cradle of new friendships. The initiate is vouched for to his fellows. This is a “man,” so the committee has said. He is worthy. He is well qualified. His reputation suffers not under the tongues of his friends. He is honest, upright, of good character. What the committee has said of him to the Lodge which accepts him, other committees and the Lodge have said of every member the newly-made brother will greet. Surely no happier beginning to friendships could be imagined. The young Master Mason who cannot find in his Lodge the men who will later become the friends of his heart - surely is he fortunate in his choice of a Lodge!

The Lodge gives the gentle gift of innocent recreation to her sons. The initiate will find here a conception of “good time” quite different from that of the world without. The “good time” of a Lodge smoker, banquet, informal picnic, entertainment, ladies’ night, concert, Masonic talk or what-have-you; has a charm all its own quite distinct from similar functions arranged by other bodies. “Pleasure the servant. Virtue looking on,” wrote rare Ben Johnson, almost as if he had learned the phrase in the pleasures of refreshment in Lodge. The “camaraderie” of the social hour of the Lodge cannot be equaled elsewhere. Within these portals where men upon the level and part upon the square, the “good time” is not confused by questions of “who is he?” or “what does he do?” Men enjoy Lodge functions not only because of the “innocent mirth” which the Old Charges enjoin, but because of the freedom and happiness; one must accept all others in the Lodge at face value.

A great gift of the Fraternity is that of home in a strange place.

That “The Mason is never homesick” is a truism. In practically any town in the land - aye, in thousands of towns the world over - are Freemasons and Freemason’s Lodges. Come to any Lodge a stranger and knock on the door. If the knocker can prove that he is a member a royal welcome awaits, warming to the heart, easing the pain of loneliness, comforting to him who is far from those he loves and knows. One thinks naturally of Byron’s:

“Tis sweet to know there is an eye will mark our coming, And will look brighter when we come.”

and Shakespeare's:

"His worth is warrant for his welcome." Nor is this "home for the homeless" all sentiment.

Many a Mason has been stranded in a strange place - and been speeded to his destination by brotherly hands. Many a man in a town he does not know has entered it a stranger and departed with new friends upon his list. The Mystic Tie is a "real" tie, too strong for breaking, be the strain put upon it never so great.

A gift of the Fraternity which it is good to take from the box of memory and muse upon is that of kinship with the old. To do as all good brothers and fellows have done who have passed this tiled door before is inspiring to all but the most practical minded. To kneel where George Washington knelt; to take the obligation which was sacred to Benjamin Franklin; to sit, in fancy, with the first Grand Master in London; to be initiated with Elias Ashmole; to look over the shoulder of the unknown priest whose careful penmanship lives to this day on our Regius poem; to gather with Athelstan and the great Assembly in York a thousand years ago - to go back, back, and still further back, through the Roman Collegia, Ancient Mystery, into Egypt and perhaps the very birth of the legend of Isis and Osiris - be spiritually one of a long line of brethren who have knelt at this Altar, taken these vows, lived this life and loved these teachings - that is a gift all Freemasons may have for the taking, and which none take but value.

"O, there are Voices in the Past

Links of a broken chain;

Wings that can bear me back to times

Which cannot come again;

May God forbid that I should lose

The echoes that remain." (Proctor)

A companion gift is the kinship with the present day.

More than three million men in this nation are now living who have taken the Masonic obligations, and who hail the new brother, as he may hail them, with that dearest of titles given by man to men - "Brother!" These three million - more than four millions in the world - will look upon the work you may do in the Lodge as important. Anciently it was written "Laborare est orare" - to labor is to pray.

He who accepts the responsibilities of Masonic membership will learn to pray by unselfish labor; labor on committees, labor on fellowcraft teams, perhaps labor in conferring degrees. Labors of love, all, but all bringing their own reward. Not the least of her gifts is this opportunity the Ancient Craft puts before her sons, that they may work for the common good.

One of Freemasonry's most precious gifts to those who seek her light is her emphasis on religion. Freemasonry is not a religion - Freemasonry is "religion," which, without the qualifying article, is quite a different matter. A Religion is a method or mode of worship of God as conceived in that system. "Religion", with no qualifying article, is knowledge of, obedience to, dependence on and utter belief in Deity. The Freemason may worship any God he pleases, and name as he will; God, Jehovah, Allah, Buddha, Christ, Primordial Urge or Great First Cause. Freemasonry's term for Deity is "The Great Architect of the Universe," but she cares no whit what her sons may call Him in their prayers.

For a thousand reasons men may wish to "become" Freemasons, but the great reason why men "remain" Freemasons, devoted to the principles and teachings of the Order, is vitally concerned with this non-doctrinal, non-sectarian, non-dogmatic teaching of religious truths which neither conflict nor interfere with the tenets and practices of any religion; nay, which buttress and uphold the teachings of the Church.

All men at heart are religious and desire kinship and communication with a Supreme Power. Many men do not phrase this need to themselves; many never think of it. Yet it is within all, as truly as hunger and thirst for material food and drink are present. Freemasonry satisfies this hunger in men who cannot, or do not, appease it in church; Freemasonry adds to the hunger, and therefore to the satisfaction, of men who "do" find in the church the gratification of a spiritual need the stronger that they may not put it into words.

In a Lodge emphasis is everywhere upon an Unseen Presence. Lodges are erected to God. Freemasons open and close Lodges with Prayer. A candidate receives the benefit of Lodge prayer and later must pray for himself. The number three is everywhere in Lodge - three degrees, three stations, three principal officers, three Great Lights, three Lesser Lights, three steps on the Master's Carpet, three pillars . . . and three is the numerical equivalent of the triangle, most ancient symbol of Deity. The initiate may learn of this as he will; he cannot escape the implications of the Letter "G" whether he will or no. As millions have learned before him, he will come to the conviction that there is a "Winding Stair," which "does" lead to a "real" Middle Chamber the Letter in the East stands for a "reality," to know and understand which is the end and aim of life.

The young man petitions a Lodge, is passed by the committee, receives a favorable ballot of his fellows, and lives thereafter with the proud privilege of wearing a Masonic apron and saying to those who ask, "I am a Master Mason." For a little space he walks forward up the hill; then he turns his steps downward on the sunny side, facing the western sun. At long last the shadows fall and he steps into the sunlight beyond the horizon.

Then he has that precious heritage which is for all Masons, and only for Master Masons - to be laid to rest with the tears of his brethren, the white apron of initiation the only decoration on his bier, the solemn words of the comforting Masonic service in the ears of his relatives and friends, and, at the end, peace under the Sprig of Acacia of immortal hope. Surely this is not least among the gifts which the gentle Craft has for those who love her and whom she loves.

The greatest gift? It is, of course, a matter of opinion. To some it will be one, to others another of those here so slightly sketched.

Sadly sang the great Persian poet:

“There was a Door to which I found no key

There was a Veil through which I might not see;

Some little talk awhile of Me and Thee

There was - and then no more of Me and Thee.”

To many, her greatest gift is this; Freemasonry gives to her sons a Key. Many never fit it to the door. Others turn the Key, but never push the portal wide. Some there are who swing the gate on its hinges to enter the “foreign countries” of Freemasonry, there to wander and to ponder, to study, and to learn, to delve and to dig into the foundations, the symbolism, the history, the inner meaning of the old, old society. For these are the gifts transcending gold and frankincense and myrrh; gifts of spiritual satisfaction, of knowledge gained, of understanding won.

For many pleasures of this life man has invented names,; the glory of music, the loveliness of painting, the beauty of sculpture, the satisfactions of the body, the happiness of unselfishness. For others, more ethereal, no words have yet been coined. But the Key leads to the door, beyond which stretches the path to knowledge of those unknown, unnamed joys which only the possessors understand. In Freemasonry, as in the Great Light, it is said:

“Ask and ye shall receive; Seek and ye shall find;

Knock, and it shall be opened unto you.”

He who asks, seeks and knocks, in Freemasonry will receive gifts as beautiful as they are indescribable, as desirable as they are imponderable. And here the word of those older and wiser in the Craft, since it is not given to any man to catalog in words that which no words may limn.

Say to the you man who asks you what he will find in Freemasonry; “You will receive what you expect and all you expect.” Say to him:

“If you expect little and give much, you will receive far more than tongue may tell.” Finally, sat unto him: “Ask of Freemasonry what you will - and it shall be given to you, even the gifts of the Magi. But ask of her nothing, unless you come with a heart open first to give.”

“FOR THAT, AND THAT ONLY, IS BROTHERHOOD!”