

Hi,

My husband - he's one of the "Brothers"- brought home another book... he must have a thousand by now! It's another one of those Mason books. Usually he tucks them away in his den and that's the last I see of them but he left this one lying in the living room.

While dusting the table, I flipped through the pages. There weren't any pictures but one chapter caught my eye. It was called "It's a Secret," or something like that. Secrets are always inviting, so I read on.

You know how they always like to pretend that they have some real, deep secrets that they probably only whisper to each other in dark rooms under a blanket ...? Well, anyway, I read it! And I'm glad I did. It says so many interesting things that we girls should know about that I spent the rest of the afternoon typing it out for you. Don't let on that we've read it. Actually I was a bit disappointed not to have found a secret, but let them have their fun.

... Rosza Nell Bairt

*[Ed. Note: The preceding, the frontispiece of this paper, is in the form of a letter from the wife of one Mason to the wives of other Masons in the Lodge.]*

## **SO WHAT'S THE BIG SECRET?**

Over fifty years ago, at about age twelve, I noticed that my Sunday school teacher was wearing a strange ring. It was a wide gold band similar to a wedding ring. What made it different was the device of an equilateral triangle with a little squiggle inside the borders. (Masons will recognize that he was wearing the ring of the 14th degree of Scottish Rite.) Finally one Sunday, my curiosity got the better of me. I pointed to his ring and asked, "What's that?" His answer was a quick "That's a secret." "Well, what does it mean?" I asked, and with a kindly smile he cut me off: "If I told you, it wouldn't be a secret anymore, would it?"

So a group of about a dozen boys missed being told that there was such a thing as Freemasonry, and perhaps a few positive things about it. Based on what I learned years later, my Sunday school teacher could have named a dozen other men in that congregation who were also Masons. Some of us might have waited impatiently for our twenty-first birthdays, so that we might be Masons, too. And even more years later, as I learned more about Masonry, it became clear that the existence of Freemasonry and any man's membership in it were in no way "secrets." Half a century ago, some Masons apparently misunderstood the "secrets" of the Lodge. Many still do. That misunderstanding is never more destructive than in the attitudes of many Masons who fully believe that they are permitted to say nothing about Masonry to their families. I have seen letters to Masonic publications in which fathers have lamented not being allowed to tell their sons anything about the Fraternity, sons whom they would very much like to join them in their Lodges.

It is difficult to accept that there are many Masons who don't really understand what is secret and what is not. It is even more difficult to accept that there are men who relish having secrets in order to feel special, hoping that they will be the envy of those outside. The latter type was brought to my attention during an auto-graphing session at a shopping mall bookstore. A young woman asked me to sign a book for her and then said, "I hope this book will help to save my marriage!" I had to tell her that there was nothing about *Born in Blood* designed to aid marital relationships, but curiosity led me to ask her why she had made that remark.

She was twenty-three years old, her husband was twenty-five, and they had been married for seven months. He had become a Freemason soon after they returned from their honeymoon. "He says words that I don't understand," she explained, "and when I ask what they mean, he says, 'It's a secret. I can't tell you.'" There was more. "Sometimes, he stands in front of me and makes funny motions with his hands. Then when I ask him what he's doing, he says, 'It's a secret!' So I say, 'Well, if it's a secret, don't do it in front of me!'" Having embarked on recounting her plight, her resentment poured out. "This goes on all the time. His Mason thing is driving me crazy. I wish he'd drop out of it, or stop beating on me with it." (I couldn't resist suggesting to her that she ask her husband whether his secrets meant that they were allowed to have secrets from each other. If he answered "Yes," as he must, she should say to him, "Oh, thank God! That makes me feel a lot better." Then, I suggested, she should let him stew for a while, wondering what her secrets might be, and that should serve as the basis for a truce.) Quite apart from the fact that the young man had not matured enough to realize that teasing is not an acceptable form of humor, he was simply asserting his sense of his own importance, if not superiority. I formed a secret society with a friend when we were eight or nine years old. The society had a secret password, a secret grip, and a secret buried treasure. It also had a secret purpose, which was to annoy my kid sister. The battle cry was "I know something you don't know, nyah, nyah, nyah!" There are men who have never shaken that desire to know something that others don't know. The urge can be so great that they present to themselves, and others, that they are possessed of very important hidden information or knowledge. I have even had Masonic dropouts tell me that they were disappointed because their Masonic membership had not led to their being made privy to dark secrets, which had been their sole reason for joining. That love of secrecy, even when it is totally inappropriate, can last a lifetime. I found that out one evening when I talked to an eighty-two-year-old Masonic widow. Her husband had been a Freemason for forty-seven years when he died. From correspondence found in his desk she had learned that he was a "thirty-third degree, whatever that is," and a Knight Templar. She was annoyed because although most of their expenditures were joint efforts, "all kinds of dues" and the occasional charitable donation were completely unilateral. She was never consulted, and never got an explanation. Worst of all, he had a closet for his Masonic paraphernalia on the second floor of their home, with a lock that had just one key. She was told that if he ever failed to lock the door, she must not look inside. "I called it 'Bluebeard's Closet,'" she said.

The result, of course, was resentment. She got her revenge for his Masonic secrecy when their son, who was engaged to be married, told her that he planned to join his father's Lodge. She sat him down in the kitchen for a long talk, during which she recited the feelings that his father's Masonry had engendered in her. She said, "Sweetheart, Nancy is such a lovely girl, and her happiness should be as important to you as your own. Don't do this to her, and to your marriage." Her son did not join a Masonic Lodge, which she took as a personal victory. "I talked him out of it!" she said proudly.

While she was visiting our home, I asked if she would like to see a video about the Freemasons. She said she would, so I played for her *The Unseen Journey*, the sixty-minute video produced for the Grand Lodge of Illinois. At the end she said, "I've learned more about the Masons in one hour than I did in almost fifty years of living with one. I didn't know that George Washington and all those famous men were Freemasons. And I

knew nothing about all those charity projects. That's wonderful. Why didn't my husband tell me those things?"

The Mason who feels that he cannot discuss his Masonry with his wife, son, grandson, or neighbor is doing the Fraternity a great disservice. The rule that no man is ever asked to become a Mason, but rather must ask to join, absolutely requires that someone must tell him something in order to establish that desire to become a Mason. This doesn't mean that there are no secrets in Freemasonry, because there are. I, for one, would hate to see them abandoned. They are reminders of the days when men had to meet and identify each other in total secrecy, not as an innocent game, but as a rigid practice to protect their lives.

There is an Old Charge of Freemasonry that says that no Mason should tell the secrets of a Brother Mason that can cost that Brother his life and property. What secret could a medieval Mason have had that could cause such a total catastrophe? There was just one. When Gregory IX ascended the papal throne in 1227, the Albigensian Crusade in southern France had been burning and butchering for eighteen years, without ever succeeding in wiping out the Cathar heresy. The pope decided to remove the responsibility of stamping out heresy from the secular arm and authorize the Church to undertake the purification of the faith. In 1229, he established the Inquisition, and in that same year, at the Council of Toulouse, the Church set the universal punishment for the crime of heresy. Anyone found to be a heretic, or anyone giving aid to a heretic, or anyone even giving advice to a heretic, merited death. In addition, the sinner's house was to be torn down, or burned down, and his land taken by the Church.

During the ensuing years, the one secret that a man could have had that would cost him his life and property was that he had material disagreement with the Church of Rome, and so could be convicted of heresy. Even treason against his king, which was punishable by death, did not incur an automatic loss of his property. The application of torture, now officially approved, meant that just to be accused of heresy could be a hideous experience, even if he was eventually judged to be innocent. Countless men, no doubt, went into permanent hiding. Others banded together to help each other, as did the Lollards in England and various groups on the Continent. Examinations of the Old Charges of Masonry that define the assistance to be given a Brother away from home indicate very clearly that Freemasonry was one of these groups. And the only way any such group could survive and function effectively was as a secret society.

When revealing oneself could bring such physical and economic tragedy, any man can be expected to demand all the protection from betrayal that he can get. That is why candidates for membership in the society were blindfolded until they had taken their oaths to keep their Brothers' secrets. Only then were they permitted to see the faces of the other men in the room. Since even to be spotted attending a clandestine meeting might mean betrayal and death, a lookout or sentry was always posted when members gathered. Freemasons remember that function with the Lodge officer called the Tyler, who stands guard outside the meeting room in a purely symbolic role. At one time the Tyler stood at his post with a drawn sword in his hand. Now he is more likely to be sitting, and his sword of office is often a three-inch replica hanging as a pendant on a chain around his neck. The Tyler's services as a guard are no longer critical for the safety of the men attending the meeting. But his office does serve to remind his Masonic Brothers of the time when such security was a vital necessity, and to remind them to remember and

honor their predecessors who risked their lives in the struggle for religious freedom. The risks encountered by those medieval Masons in their daily lives were as great as those in the Lodge meetings. To help a Brother on the run from the threat of torture and death, it was essential to have a system of words and signs of recognition that could be used wherever the Mason might find himself. There were terms, phrases, and questions that could be worked into ordinary conversation so that a fellow Mason would recognize a Brother in need. A seemingly innocent response would tell the man needing help that he had made the right contact. There were signs of recognition and handgrips that could be used without any words spoken, for mutual recognition and the promise of shelter, food, or guidance. These are the catechisms, hand signals, and handgrips that are preserved today, even though they are no longer needed. Today, Freemasons can be recognized as such by means of decals, bumper stickers, and baseball caps, not to mention dues cards in their wallets. So why do they cling to those “secrets”? For the same reason that we celebrate Veterans’ Day, Memorial Day, and Presidents’ Day; for the same reason we reenact Civil War battles and teach our children the dying words of Nathan Hale and battle cries like “Remember the Alamo!” There are traditions worth preserving and men worth remembering. The Masonic “secrets” help a Fraternity to remember men who took terrible risks to help gain those personal freedoms which we believe all men are entitled to enjoy.

Yes, some will say, but why do the Freemasons have to maintain their traditions in total secrecy? The answer is that they don’t. Non-Masons have known the “secret” words and signals for over two and a half centuries and still enjoy “revealing” them. What the anti-Masons miss is the overridingly important point that Masons never change their “secrets,” however many times they are revealed. Think about that! If a battlefield commander even suspects that his password has leaked to the enemy, he immediately changes the password. In a truly secret organization, the revelation of a secret term, a recognition or distress signal, necessitates a prompt change because the secret signs are protecting secret information. They are not symbolic, as they are in Freemasonry, but tools of subversion. The “secrets” in Freemasonry appear in articles, pamphlets, radio shows, books, and videotapes; yet they are never changed by so much as a syllable or gesture. The Masons do not change those well-known secret signs, passwords, and recognition signals because their uses, in their traditional forms, are “rites of remembrance.” They well know that all of their traditional secrets are no longer secret. A comparable situation may be found in some tours of the “stately homes” of England, in which tourists are shown secret “priest-holes.” These were secret rooms or compartments where loyal Catholics hid their priests from the “Pursuivants,” the royal priest-catchers eager to escort them to the headsman’s block. They are no longer secret, and they are no longer needed. Yet they are carefully preserved as a reminder of how dangerous life and religious faith used to be.

In addition to their condemnations of Masonic recognition signals, anti-Masons also find evil in the fact that only a Mason in good standing can attend a Lodge meeting. They ask, “Why do Masons need secret meetings?” In fact, notices of those meetings, giving the place, date, and time, frequently appear in highly visible places, like local newspapers, hardly appropriate for a truly clandestine gathering. Masonic meetings are not secret, they are simply for paid-up members only, hardly an unusual feature.

Sometimes private Lodge meetings deal with matters that should be confidential. They may consider giving assistance to a Brother's widow, handle criticism of a member from within or from outside the Lodge, consider chastisement of a member who appears to have behaved in a manner that falls short of the moral standards expected of a Mason. It is proper that this sort of membership business should not be carried out in public.

The vibrant Masonic world isn't secret at all. Masonic history is freely available to all. Masonic beliefs and principles are never secret and can be easily discovered by anyone interested. Ten-dollar books, sold by television evangelists and purporting to contain dark Masonic secrets, actually reveal nothing that isn't available at no charge whatsoever at any good public library (naturally, they keep that fact a real secret). When they lie, as they frequently do, that information is, of course, available only in their sensational books.

The best protection against allegations of secret worship, secret plots, and subversion of religion is to make known to the world just what Freemasonry is all about. The Fraternity must stop hiding its light under a bushel. Lack of knowledge creates a void that is amply filled by anti-Masons with half-truths, perverted truths, and outright falsehoods that appeal to a natural human weakness, a taste for scandal. Ignorance is the real enemy.

*[Ed. Note: This presentation is a transcription from A Pilgrim's Path*

*By John J. Robinson]*