

The Romance of Freemasonry
by
Right Worshipful and Reverend Brother
Joseph Fort Newton, D.D.,
of Philadelphia
Addressed to Twelve Hundred Members of the Grand Lodge of
Canada, in the Province of Ontario, Assembled at a Banquet
in the Royal York Hotel, Toronto,
on
Wednesday Evening, July 19th, 1939.

Most Worshipful Brother Grand Master, guests, and members of the Grand Lodge of Canada, in the Province of Ontario:

It is both an honour and a very great happiness for me to be here this evening to greet this extraordinary assembly of our brethren. It is the third time that I have visited Toronto. The first time I came in 1910. As a very young man I came to ask the late Goldwin Smith to write me an introduction to the life of President Lincoln which I was engaged in preparing. He received me very kindly when I told him what I was doing and he promised to do what I asked. Unfortunately, death did not allow him to fulfil that promise. It was at that time that I first had a glimpse of your beautiful City.

It seems to me that a new City has arisen since I was here twenty-five years ago. As I remember it then, the old Queen's Hotel stood where this magnificent hotel stands now. It is a brilliant City and I am deeply grateful to you for this cordial welcome.

It is a great Grand Lodge, - the Grand Lodge of Canada, in the Province of Ontario, and I am happy to know something of its history, not only in that brief and concise and beautiful work of M.W. Brother Herrington, but also in the larger volumes of the late Brother Ross Robertson. I don't know of any Masonic research that can surpass the works of the late Brother Robertson in the carefulness with which he arrived at his conclusions and conditions and in the enchanting style in which he wrote. He wrote, as did Brother Herrington, only in much briefer form, part of the romance of Masonry in this great Dominion. It is indeed a happiness to be here at the unveiling of a great portrait, - a portrait of a man who takes his place among the noble Masons who have ruled over this jurisdiction. One of the towering figures of this Grand Lodge is that of Brother Wilson. Nobody can read the history of this Grand Lodge and not realize what a truly great Mason he was. (Applause) He was wise with the wisdom of astuteness, patient as a negotiator over the union of two jurisdictions in the same territory,

and one of the most prolific speakers of English that I can recall in the leadership of our Brotherhood. It is a grief to me not to meet Worshipful Brother Ponton this evening. We have been friends for many years and I officiated for him on a most interesting occasion in my church in New York City some years ago when he was married again. He is a very brilliant Mason and I think the best fraternal correspondent in the western hemisphere. I knew he had been ill and had suffered an accident but I had so much hoped that he might be present this evening. I hope the brethren who are near him will convey my greetings and remember me to him with special affection. This is a wonderful assembly and I like your spirit of fun and frolic. We do not have as much fun in our lodge as it is mostly made up of old Masons. I want to talk to you this evening, if I may, on the 'Romance of Masonry.'

The great introduction to which you have listened will show you my interest in Masonry began before I was born and I owe it to the life of my father. Yes, it is true, that from the earliest years when I heard that history it warmed my heart. It filled me with a strong urge and put such a stir in my heart that I wanted to follow it from my earliest boyhood. It showed me a great brotherly love to the wives and orphans of many unfortunate fellows. And as I have gone on through life and have seen more of the cruelty of the world and of the unbelievable hardness of the human heart, I have realized that Masonry is one of the great poems of the world. It is romantic in its origin.

I remember very well asking for admission to the Brotherhood when I was a young minister. When they were good enough to allow me to enter, I seemed to be in a whispering gallery where voices were trying to speak to me out of the past and tell me wise and good and beautiful truths. I wondered if the men in that lodge realized the full meaning and the far-echoing and haunting meanings of the symbols round about them. I wondered if they realized that they had in their hands the shadow of something great and wonderful and I wanted to know all about it. And in the evening, after I had received the third degree of Masonry, I asked if there was any book that would tell a young man all about what it is and whence it came and what it is in the world today. Nobody seemed to know of that kind of book. Then I asked the Master a lot of questions. He was a good man and a good Master and knew a good deal about Masonic Law, but he was not widely enough informed of the story of Masonry.

Then I moved to Iowa. Far back in the history of that Grand Jurisdiction, the first Grand Secretary of the Grand Lodge of Iowa in some way induced the Grand Lodge to appropriate the magnificent sum of five dollars to start a library. He did not stop. He kept at it again and again until he built one of the greatest Masonic Libraries in the world. Some of you Masons have visited it. If you want to do any research in the field of Masonry, that is the place to do it. He had the genius of a book collector and how he got some of the books without being arrested for housebreaking, nobody was ever able to understand. And there it was,- right at my door. About the same time I became Grand Chaplain and having told this story about a desire for this book, the Grand Lodge asked me to write such a book for the Grand Lodge, and I did. Going back and back and back, sifting all kinds of wild legends, I sought to find the real facts about real Masons and put them forth in an understanding way. That little book appeared in 1914 and has gone all over the Masonic world. It is the only book that has the imprint of a Grand Lodge. Later, while living in England, I did more research and went through it for mistakes and then brought out a revised edition. It was translated into Dutch and used as a text in the Netherlands. It was also translated into Swedish and was used in the same way. It is printed in Portugese and Syrian and in German and there is a copy in almost every Masonic Lodge all over the world. So it has gone from place to place because the need I felt had evidently been widespread, and for the past thirty years I have tried to do two things; first to induce Masons to know more about Masonry; second, to convey knowledge to them that they may be able to know more intelligently of the constructive life of truthful Masonry. Yes, it is a romance. It was romantic in its origin. Let me sketch it briefly.

The world has cracked up and gone to pieces, not for the first time nor for the last, with wars and then stretches of peace and re-organization all in our generation. The cozy, comfortable world of the Middle Ages was shattered by the Revival of Learning. It was broken up politically by the advent of nationalism, by the people of the north outside of the old Roman Empire. It was later upset by the Industrial Revolution and still later by the march of the victory of modern science. The Roman Catholics gave to the men of the Middle Ages a shrine that still stands. It may be found useful again. We have found today, in the breaking up of the Middle Ages, that they had two commanding philosophies of life but with the breaking up of the Middle Ages, as far as is realized, we created our modern world, and from among them - Free Masonry, instead of a response of an unformulated aspiration.

It was in a very casual way that a few conceived the idea of the Grand Lodge. There never was such a thing before. They did not know they were doing anything great, - and that is the way it was done. They never sat down and planned the thing deliberately. They didn't even keep any minutes of the proceedings of the famous evening. No minutes were kept for some little time. None were published until 1723. I have great pleasure in reminding you that the constitution of Freemasonry was written by a clergyman. That is why it has never been amended. (Applause) Of course that clergyman was a Presbyterian. When I read the constitution it sounded like a product of a General Assembly.

The first Grand Lodge was established midway between the journals of John Fox, the Quaker, and John Wesley, the Methodist. That is a chronicle that broadens out like a picture of that century. I used to take a copy in my pocket when I went all over England just to see if I could find a place he had not been. It was a curious England. It was a time of moral decline and you remember the famous sermon describing the moral slump and chaos where the churches were empty and the clergy were sometimes drunken.

Yes, it was a time when the very depth of hidden human need was met by some divine response and as at all times when real religion is at altogether too low an ebb people argued about religion and pummeled each other with Bibles to get the better of the argument. When men have nothing real to argue about, they argue about religion. Our William Penn gave that epigram. When they do that, they do it in the name of religion, that which religion forbids. The country was cut up and divided into religious sects so small that you have to call them insects. It was at that time when Anderson sat down and wrote that article in which he said, "In olden days, Free Masons were obliged to be of the religion of the country in which they worked." Now the religion of Masonry is that in which all good men agree - agree to be good men and true; men of honour and of honesty. And they agree that each Mason may follow the dictates of his own conscience; may practice the religion of his own choice. And so they made Masonry a centre of union to those who would otherwise be kept at a distance, - a centre of friendship.

That was the purpose of the organization as set forth in our Constitution - a great centre of friendship and a focus of fellowship to bring men together that they may know and understand and therefore love each other. It was not our desire to reform the world but just to make friends of men in the world, bring men a little closer together so

that each could feel the heartbeat of the other and sit down and sing together and learn to be friends.

Brethren, there is nothing that this distracted world needs now more than the making of friends among men. No wonder in that time of loneliness men were ready to be drawn together as they will be shortly again. The end of the world has come and that is what has brought us now very close to the end of the human world. No wonder the romance of Masonry grew so fast. It was needed. Men underneath their sectarianism wanted to be friends as I believe they do in their hearts today in spite of high walls and fortifications. I believe if we knew, what is going on in the hearts of men we should discover that their deep hunger is for a greater friendship for each other. I believe that the religion we need is one of great friendship and good will. So Masonry grew because it was needed, because it ministered to something that men must have.

It grew so fast that at one time there were four Grand Lodges in England. There was a Grand Lodge of all England and two subordinate lodges. Then there was indeed an interesting contest between two lodges. They had contests, - these two lodges, and the Grand Master of the Grand Lodge loved to write letters to these lodges and encourage them along. I have read some of the letters he wrote and he really loved the men with whom he was engaged in contest. After all, it was a contest between these two lodges and not a conflict. There was rivalry, but no wrangling. That is as it should be between Masons and when I read the letters he wrote to the men I knew he had the heart of a true Mason, and I love him for it. One Grand Lodge adopted the British Army and the other the Navy and between the two they spread all over the face of the world. They brought it to this country and Massachusetts and Pennsylvania are still debating which has the honour of being the oldest Grand Lodge. Living in Pennsylvania, I must take the side of Pennsylvania, of course.

We had a great debate with Massachusetts and Maine not so long ago. The beauty of the debate was that they both happened to be right, each from his own point of view. Massachusetts is right in saying that they had the first lodge (in Boston) and Pennsylvania is right in saying that they were the first constituted lodge under the jurisdiction of the British obedience. But the first lodge in Pennsylvania was born in 1731 of which lodge Benjamin Franklin was Master in 1734. It was authorized in 1735 by the Grand Lodge of Ireland. But we had a good time arguing it out. I do not know whether you would be interested in part of the romance in the making of the Republic to the south, in

what we call the War of Independence and you call a disruption of the Empire. It was largely due to Freemasonry which was the only intercolonial network through which the thirteen jealous colonies could possibly work together. It was not easy to get a system that would get the colonies to work together. They had no common form of government. The Church could not do it. It was divided. In New England you might be turned out in the snow with the hope that you might freeze to death. You might be hung by the society of friends on Boston Common. It was a very unfortunate thing to be an Anglican in New England in those days. On the other hand, if you lived in Virginia in the south, and were a Methodist, you had an equally hard time. You had to pay higher taxes. They even had a law on the statute books permitting the burning of heretics. They never enforced that law because they were much too interested in fox-hunting to bother and so the law was never enforced. Those conditions are true of every one of the Commonwealths of our Republic. I could tell you almost without end of my Mother Lodge in Texas. We had a revolution of our own in Texas and set up a Republic. We defeated the Mexican army.

My Mother was born in Texas when it was a Republic, before it was even a part of the United States. And if you go to the capital city of that State you can see the French Embassy there where the Ambassador of France lived. Holland Lodge was the Mother Lodge out of which grew the Grand Lodge of Texas. The public school system of Texas was revised in Holland Lodge. The men that carved out the Commonwealth, who organized and framed the law, were members of Holland Lodge. Or take King Solomon's Lodge. They did the same thing in that Commonwealth. Or St. John's Lodge in Philadelphia. They did the same thing. This is the way the public schools of New York were established. The Grand Lodge conceived the idea of a school, free, for underprivileged children. After awhile it grew out of all bounds and beyond the powers of the Grand Lodge and was then taken over by the State. But I dare say that it was true in this Dominion, that the men who set up these institutions of liberty, schools for greater enlightenment, - and I might say that this was not an easy thing to do, - were men of our Fraternity, brothers and builders. Masonry has always made men. It is a great romance, I tell you. If I had the time to follow it through with you this evening, I believe you would all agree with me that it is a great romance. I want the young men here to go back to their places, realizing what a great tradition they stand for. Among the most precious of spiritual possessions of the English-speaking people is the human spirit and enterprise of Freemasonry. It is a shining tradition. It has been a shining tradition wherever it has gone, as you will have learned from the remarks made by the Grand

Master of Quebec this evening. It is a tradition of life and liberty and loving kindness which some are trying to tear down today.

If it has been a romance in the past, will it be equally as romantic in preserving the inheritance of my fathers and yours and our common race? Think of what would happen to civilization if the first thing to be destroyed is the Masonic Fraternity.

They tried to destroy it in Switzerland last year and made a cunning attempt to do so but fortunately were thwarted. If Masonic Lodges are the first thing to be closed, the second thing is the Christian Church. They stand or fall together because both rest on the same faith and the same dignity of human beings. When one falls the other falls, too. When man loses faith in himself he loses the sense of his own worth to his race and to his God. He loses the vision of his own rights that are imbedded in his nature, placed there by God and, if democracy of this kind goes down, Christianity follows it. This is the desperate cynicism of our day. Civilized society is endangered by the sudden and unaccountable advent of a spirit, - sinister and ghastly and ruthless. The old Caesarism was much different. There was dignity and law and jurisprudence in the old Roman Law and there were many great lawyers. We are in the grip of blind idealism. It is a time of great danger in history as you well know. Culture is in the eclipse. The toms-toms of war are heard incessantly. It is not a time to be nervous. It is not a time to lose hope. But, if the civilization that was built up so patiently is to be preserved and passed on, it will take all the fortitude and spiritual vision of Freemasonry, with the Christian Church, to take a great part in that enterprise.

Temporarily, at least, we have suffered along with the Christian Church, along with the universities, along with all those lovely and beautiful agencies and institutions that have been built up for the refinement of mankind.

Some of us feel a little discouraged. We are sick of the world in which we live. We want to get out of the net in which we are caught. We would like to have a little rest before beginning again to join hands with like-minded men and women to rebuild the temple of liberty and culture and reason and kindness which these incredible nitwits have torn down. It will take a long time to rebuild it, but it must be done, and it will be done when sanity returns to this insane world.

Three years ago a book was written in which the writer said "These things are behind us: human sacrifice, religious persecution, the

subjection of woman, punishment without trial, torture by responsible authority, irresponsible government, the right to go to war regardless of treaties."

These things, the writer said, are behind us! No, they are right before our eyes! No optimist is worth his salt who does not see everything that the pessimist sees.

That is the kind of world in which Masonry with its gentleness, its loving kindness, its patience, its spiritual faith and its moral philosophy, is trying to build. At least it can build men up in spiritual strength and moral integrity, so that if the world cracks up we need not crack up too.

Edward Gibbon, in "The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire," gave five reasons for the collapse of that civilization which plunged the world into the Dark Ages. It was a great empire, perhaps the greatest the world has ever known, when the genius of the Caesars picked up the jigsaw puzzle which Alexander the Great had left, and made a Roman Empire. It was the first time the world had unity based upon law and not merely upon force. Wherever the Roman legions went they made roads, they set up courts; and to this day their jurisprudence is a precious legacy of our race.

Why did the Roman Empire collapse? For five reasons, as Gibbon read the record:

First, the rapid increase of divorce; the undermining of the dignity and sanctity of the home, the basis of human society.

Second, higher and higher taxes and the spending of public moneys for bread and circuses.

Third, the mad craze for pleasure; sport becoming every year more exciting and more brutal.

Fourth, the building of gigantic armaments when the real enemy was within, in the decadence of the people.

Fifth, the decay of religion, faith fading into a mere form, losing touch with life and becoming impotent to guide it.

It looks like an untouched photograph of much of the life of our time, does it not, brethren?

Some of our people are very much afraid lest the alien "isms" which infest the earth may affect our body politic with some germ, red or black or some other color. They have a right to be afraid if these trends which brought Rome down cannot be arrested.

Christianity grasped the crumbling, classic world when Rome fell, reshaped it, and saved its culture. But if that faith grows dim in our hearts, what hope have we for our own civilization?

This is a dark picture. To be truthful, one must paint it so. The misgiving in my own mind is back in your minds, too, as I well know. Who knows his way out? Who can see through the mist and the fog?

But, brethren, we believe in God. We are taught that, as one of the first as well as one of the last lessons that Masonry teaches. To me the present world situation is a complete and overwhelming demonstration of the truth and validity of the principles for which Masonry and the Church stand. It is not because men have obeyed those principles that the world is what it is. No; it is because those principles have been repudiated.

It was a great German poet who said that the history of the world is the judgment of the world; and the history of today is the judgment, based on the word of God, that the world is on a wrong basis, going in a wrong direction, and "unmerciful disaster follows fast and follows faster."

Everything that is not built up on the truth will fall down. A lie cannot stand. The moral order of the world, the moral order of the universe, is against the social and political order of the world.

That is the great hope, to me, and the only hope I have left.

During the year two charming brethren wrote an open letter to me in the press. A most courteous and kindly letter it was, in which they referred to my talk some time ago asking for a "united Masonry in a divided world." They said many interesting things, some that I did not know - and it is better not to know so many things than to know some things that are not so! But it was a most gracious letter; and one of their criticisms, if so gentle a chiding could be called a criticism, was that I put entirely too much religion into Masonry.

That may be so, brethren; but I cannot help it. God put religion into Masonry. It is one of the forms of the spiritual life, one of the most

beautiful forms; and outside of my home and the house of God it has my devotion as nothing else has. Do we not need such a great world fraternity as this? Built of spiritual faith; the faith of God the Eternal. The God who is the reason for our existence. The explanation of our being. The consecration of human life,- the faith of man; made in His own image and endowed with a spark of spiritual God-fire.

We need faith in life itself. Not once when I was a young man did I ever hear anybody ask the question, - "Is Life Worth While?" Not once. There were things in life that we did not like in those days, but it never occurred to us to question the value of life itself. I remember the shock that came to me in reading a book entitled "Is Life Worth While?" The question which so many young folk ask in a mood of futility and despair. And I remember, too, the inspiration I got in reading an essay written by an old and grand teacher. He said, "Yes" if you make it so it will be worth while. You will not find it to suit you, you must make it suit you. Take the raw stuff of life and give it shape. That struck a thought and a response in my heart. Always life is worth while if hearts are sound and true. But it will take heroic hearts and well established hearts to stand and keep their poise through the devastating influences that swirl about us in our time.

I go out a great deal with young people and I talk with them and I know something of what is going on in their hearts. I believe the mood of futility is beginning to ebb. I saw that reflected recently in the youth conference which has just been recently adjourned. They were confused. What they wanted to do was not to be "anti" this and "anti" that and "anti" the other thing. They did not want to pass resolutions condemning one idea or another but only to be positive, to have aspirations for the things for which we stand. Our principles are the basis of our civilization and it is not necessary to be "anti" this and "anti" that. They wanted to live up to those principles and stand by them, and make them fruitful in our own society.

That is the best effect of democracy on your side of the border or on ours. And speaking of that border,- it is invisible but so many Canadian clergymen are coming down and taking the finest churches in the United States that I am in favour of a patrol along that border!

I don't want to seem pessimistic because no man has a right to be that. No man who believes in God will lose hope nor will he let any other man lose hope. God is our great hope. This is His world. It is in His hands. It has not slipped out of His hands and it will not. We are at the end of an era; in the chaos and confusion that always attends

another era which is about to be born. It will be different. It will not fit your fashion or mine, perhaps, but our business is to know what way God is going and to get things out of God's way. I love the story about Lloyd George as told in the biography of my friend, Mr. Spender. One night in his room, during the World War, the men of Scotland Yard warned him to be very careful of plots and movements to take his life. When he heard that he burst out singing a Welsh hymn. If you ever in your life heard singing, he could sing just like an angel! Many a sing-song I have had in his home. When he had finished singing his hymn the men near said to him, "You don't seem to be alarmed by this information." He replied, "Not at all, I love it. When in time of tumult I am happy because I remember a saying of an old Welsh Preacher that when there is tumult and overturning in the town, Brothers, it means that there is a vast divine movement above. Something new is trying to break into human life - some word that God is trying to speak to us."

That story has done me no end of good. I cannot quite hear the word that God would speak for the new time which we are entering. It may be that not any of my associates can hear it. Our mind is too full of the past to listen to that newer word, but I believe, with Emerson, that there will be minds and hearts to hear that newer word, when dictators will be "gone with the wind," - when there will be a re-birth of the human soul, - with the spark of God-fire.

Liberty and justice and human society will be organized on a higher basis-something nearer the spirit of Freemasonry and the faith of the Christian Church.

Let me tell a story and close. It is a true story, not one of those yarns that you brethren sometimes tell. (Laughter) It is a story that has done me a great deal of good, and it may perhaps explain to you why I have not left my religion outside of the Lodge. It is a story of Toscanini, that great master of the orchestra. His favorite piece is the Ninth Symphony of Beethoven. He insists that his orchestra rehearse it piecemeal, each group of instruments playing its part alone: and he is very exacting about it. Then they must all play the symphony together. One day the orchestra had had a piecemeal rehearsal. Then in a hushed hall they played that mighty melody at concert pitch and with concert verve, and the volume of melody gathered and grew until every man was lifted higher and higher because that melody seemed to come from the heart of God; when it was finished the first violinist said to the second violinist, "If he scolds us after such perfect playing, I will jump up and push him off the platform."

But Toscanini did not scold. As the last note died away he stood like one transfigured, with a terrific emotion in his heart. He exclaimed, "Who am I-Toscanini? I am nobody. Who are you? Nobody. I am nothing; you are nothing. It is Beethoven. He is everything!"

Who are you, brethren? Nobody. Who am I? Nobody. I am nothing. It is God; and He is everything.