

by:

“All ritual is fortifying. Ritual is a natural necessity for mankind. The more things are upset, the more they fly to it. I abhor slovenly ritual anywhere. By the way, would you mind assisting at the examinations, if there are many visiting Brothers tonight? “You’ll find some of ‘em very rusty but - it’s the Spirit, not the Letter, that giveth life. The question of visiting Brethren is an important one. There are so many of them in London now, you see; and so few places where they can meet.”

So we read in the greatest of all Masonic stories, “In the Interests of the Brethren,” by Rudyard Kipling. It is a vivid picture of how our gentle Craft helped its wounded members in the days of the Great War, dark, dreadful and confused. No Mason can read it aloud; a lump will climb into his throat and choke him.

It tells of a Lodge of Instruction, formed by the Lodge of Faith and Works, No. 5837, for the benefit of wounded Brethren, under the guise of giving them a chance to rub up on the Ritual. The scene when the Lodge was called up at the sound of the Gavel; the rattle of crutches, the shuffle of feet - some with one leg, some with one hand - is a picture to break the heart, and mend it. The Signs were fearfully and wonderfully made!

“D’you like it?” said the Doctor to a one-footed Brother, as they sat together, after the Lodge had been seated with difficulty. “Do I? It’s Heaven to me, sittin’ in Lodge again. It’s all comin’ back now, watching their mistakes. I haven’t much religion, but all I had I learnt in Lodge,” he said with flushed face.

“Yes,” he went on, “Veiled in all’gory and illustrated in symbols - the Fatherhood of God an’ the Brotherhood of Man; an’ what more in Hell do you want. Look at ‘em!” he broke off, giggling. “See! See!” cried the one-footed Corporal. “I could ha’ done it better myself - my one foot in France. Yes, I should think they ought to do it again!”

Yet, in the midst of all the tragic confusion, the Master insisted that the Ritual be followed as nearly letter-perfect as possible; as had been the manner of Masonry from the first. In the Constitutions of 1738 we learn that Grand Lodge may be opened in Form, in Due Form and in Ample Form; all alike valid and with the same authority. When opened by any other Officer than the Grand Master, the Grand Lodge is opened only in “Form.” If a Past Grand Master, or the Deputy Grand Master presides, it is opened in “Due Form.” When the Grand Master himself is in the Chair, the grand Lodge is opened in “Ample Form.” And the same is true, with but slight variations, on this side of the sea.

Why does Masonry insist so strictly upon exactness in its Ritual? There is a profound reason, not to be forgotten or ignored. True, it is the Spirit, not the Letter, that giveth life; but the Letter

does give a Body, without which the Spirit of Masonry would be a formless blur, losing much of its meaning, if not all of its beauty. Ceremony keeps things up; without form the spirit melts into thin air and is lost.

What is true of Masonry is equally true of religion, of manners and of art. The Poet Tennyson speaks of those, "whose faith hath center everywhere, nor cares to fix itself in form." That is, they believe in everything in general and nothing in particular. Their faith is like the earth in the story of creation, as the Bible tells it, "without form and void;" a vague sentiment, as flimsy as a mist and as frail.

Manners, it has been said, are minor morals. That is, they are forms of a social ritual in which the spirit of courtesy and amenity finds expression. So essential are they as a form of social fellowship, that, as Emerson said, if they were lost, some gentlemen would be obliged to re-invent such a code. The phrase, "It is not done," has more than mere convention behind it. It bespeaks a standard, a sense of propriety, a fineness of feeling, a respect for the rights and feelings of others.

Some of our modern artists are trying to throw off the old classic forms of music, painting and poetry. The result is chaos, a formless riot of color and sound, in which a horse may be green and a song a mere mob of notes, without melody. Without lovely form the spirit of beauty fades and is lost. Ages of experience have wrought out noble forms of art and life, which we cannot defy or ignore without disaster.

The same is true of Masonry. Gentle, wise, mellow with age; its gracious spirit has fashioned a form, or body, or an art; if we call it so, in which its peculiar genius finds expression. Its old and lovely ritual, if rightly used, evokes the Spirit of Masonry, as each of us can testify. The mere opening of a Lodge creates a Masonic atmosphere in which the truths of Masonry seem more real and true. It weaves a spell about us, making fellowship gracious. It is a mystery; we love it, without caring to analyze it.

By the same token, if the rhythm of the ritual is bungled, or slurred, or dealt with hastily or without dignity; its beauty is marred and its spell broken. Just imagine the opening of Lodge, or any one of the Degrees, jazzed up, rushed through with, and how horrible it would be. The soul of Masonry would be sacrificed, and its spirit evaporated. For that reason we cannot take too much pains in giving the ritual such a rendering as befits its dignity, its solemnity and its haunting beauty.

No wonder Masonry is jealous of its ceremonies and symbols. It hesitates to make the slightest change, even when errors have crept into the ritual, lest something precious is lost. Indeed, it is always seeking "that which is lost," not alone in its great Secret, but in all its symbols which enshrine a wisdom gray with age, often but dimly seen, and sorely needed in the hurry and medley of our giddy-paced age.

Mere formalism is always a danger. Even a lofty ritual may become a rigmarole, a thing of rote and rote. Sublime truths may be repeated like a parrot, as the creed in a church may be recited without thought or feeling, by force of habit. Still, such a habit is worth keeping, and often the uttering of great words stirs the heart with a sense of the cargoes of wonder which they hold, for such as have ears to hear.

No matter; our fear of formalism - its mockery and unreality - must not blind us to the necessity of noble, stately and lovely form in which to utter and embody the truths that make us men. For that reason every part of the ritual ought to have Due Form, nothing skimped or performed perfunctorily, in order that the wise, good and beautiful truth of Masonry may have full expression and give us its full blessing. Only so can we get from it what it has to give us for our good.

Take, for example, the Opening of the Lodge, so often regarded as of no great importance in itself, save as a preliminary to what is to follow. Not so. Nothing in Masonry is more impressive, if we see it aright. As a flower "opens its Lodge," as one poet puts it, when it unfolds its petals and displays its center to the sun, which renews its life; so the opening of a Masonic Lodge is a symbol of the opening out of the human mind and heart to God. It is a drama of an inward and ineffable thing, not to be spoken of except in the poetry of symbol.

One sees more plainly in English ritual, in which the three Degrees, or grades as they name them, has each its stage. First is the stage appropriate to the Apprentice, a call to lift the mind above the level of external things. The second is a further opening, an advance in the science revealing greater things than Apprentices may know. It is an opening "upon the square," which the first Degree is not.

By the time we reach the Third Degree, a still deeper opening of the mind is implied, "upon the centre," for those of the Master rank, involving the use of finer powers of perception, to the very center and depths of being. How far and to what depth any of us is able to open the Lodge of his Mind, is the measure of what Masonry is to us. As an ancient manual of initiation tells us, urging us to an inward quest:

"There lives a Master in the hearts of men who makes their deeds, by subtle-pulling strings, dance to what time He will. With all thy soul trust Him, and take Him for thy succor. So shalt thou gain, by grace of Him, the uttermost repose, the Eternal Peace." Such meaning, and far more than here hinted, lie hidden to most of us in the simple ceremony of opening the Lodge. How much Masonry would mean for us and do for us, if only it had its due form both of ritual and interpretation. It might not explain all riddles, but it would light many a dark path, and lead us thither where we seek to go.

Religion, untainted, here dwells;

Here the morals of Athens are taught;

Great Hiram's tradition here tells How the world out of chaos was brought.

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