

THE ESSENTIALS OF FREEMASONRY.

[A Lecture delivered by V.W. Bro H. B. BRIDGE, (G.Lecturer.)]

Masonry, or, as it is now termed, Freemasonry, has existed, as we know, for several centuries. It has endured through the clashing of hostile nations, the bitterness of feeling engendered by civil war, the evil passions born of religious controversies and feuds, through persecution, abuse, mockery, and misrepresentation, and in spite of serious dissension and schisms even among its own members. Not always has it come unscathed through these trials and tests. There have been times when its fortunes were at low ebb; when its light, never obscured, had to be burned with caution and discretion; and when its members were scattered, and had to meet together by stealth and at great personal risk. But ever it has emerged unchanged in its esoteric character, unaltered as to its basic principles, differing perhaps as to outward forms, but indissolubly bound to and by its high and sublime essentials.

Originally purely operative in its character and form - that is to say, the peculiar technical association of a trade guild, with a ceremony for the regulating of the admission to its privileges of apprentices, and subsequently their advancement in the building art, such admission and training being accompanied by certain moral teachings and rules - it is now in its nature purely speculative, meditative, or ideal, while retaining an operative form of allegory and symbols. This evolution was but the natural outcome. first of the decadence of the building art, due to a cessation of the demand for great and commanding ecclesiastical and other monuments of architecture; secondly, of the admission to the Guilds, or Lodges, of those who were not operative Masons, but were "accepted" as patrons of the art; and thirdly, of the desire instinctively bred in these "accepted" Masons, who rapidly grew in numbers and influence, to perpetuate on a broader and more inclusive field an ethical system so pregnant with good to mankind.

One may well ask, what there is in Freemasonry to give it such striking vitality? What are these principles, which its teachings inculcate, that can bind man to it and to one another, in the face of danger, of persecution, of ridicule, and of abuse? On what foundations are these essentials laid that neither time, nor perils, nor worldly changes can alter them, but which have appealed to men of every age and every nation, and to the enlightened and well informed even among the uninitiated? It is the obvious duty of every Freemason not only to ask such questions, but also to see that he obtains and understands the answers to them. For it must be manifest to every earnest brother that, having been admitted to the ancient and honourable Fraternity, he is himself a trusted guardian of its honour and its reputation. How shall he measure that great responsibility unless he realises the nature of the institution to which he belongs and the importance of his trust? For it is a trust - a great trust - which has been transmitted to each and all of us, and which we in turn have to pass on to succeeding generations. In order to fulfil this trust faithfully we must undoubtedly have a proper conception of what it is we are to practise, and on what authority, and what it is we are to pass on to our successors.

Freemasonry owes its amazing vitality and its unrivalled position among associations of men to the absolute purity and, at the same time, simplicity, of the ethical system which it teaches. That ethical system, further, is in its nature of so broad a character as to render it capable of conscientious adoption and assimilation by persons of every race, of every religious denomination or school of thought, of every shade of political opinion, and of every social class, who believe in the existence of a Supreme Being - a Divine Creator. For the atheist, if, indeed, there really be such an one in these enlightened days, Freemasonry has no place.

Here, then, is the most important essential of Freemasonry - the belief in God, the Creator, the Great Architect of the Universe. Such a faith is indispensable, because it is upon the will of God, as we find it set forth in all its majesty and sublime simplicity in the V. of the S.L., that the Masonic system of morality, which includes all the tenets and principles and the high and noble ideals of Freemasonry, is founded. These tenets and principles are, in fact, but the laws of God, enacted for the instruction of

man, to point the way in which to live the higher and better life. The ethics of Freemasonry are no man-made ethics, susceptible to change and alteration to suit varying human conditions. They are the unalterable and eternal laws of the Creator propounded for the guidance of His creatures on this earth. They have behind them the Divine authority. Hence it is that, inseparable as it were from the belief in a Supreme Being, because of a divinely propounded scheme for the perfecting of man here below, there rests a belief in a future existence - in the immortality of the soul. This sustaining hope constitutes another Masonic essential.

The moral system of Freemasonry, therefore, is founded on Divine authority, and therein lies its strength, its purity, its vitality in the face of opposition, of dangers, of ridicule, and of abuse. Its humanitarian attributes appeal to all that is highest and noblest in man; its simple justice applies equally to all men, high or low, rich or poor; its beneficent and merciful provisions find an echo in the hearts of all men in whom the evil has not dominated the good, engendering in each a community of interests which binds them, man to man, in the bonds of a fraternal tie. In the initiated this tie is naturally strengthened by the common possession of certain secrets, necessary only to the safeguarding of the Masonic institution.

But it must be emphasised that Freemasonry does not claim to be a religion, nor is it such. It is theistic, and is necessarily religious in its tone and in some of its forms and ceremonies; and it is incontestably a valuable adjunct to, or helper of, religion as we understand the word. All that it claims to be is a system of ethics, a moral science; founded on Divine revelation. It possesses no dogma, and its primitive expression of faith is that of all the civilised peoples of the earth. Neither is the Holy Bible, as such, indispensable in the Lodgeroom. The Bible, per se, is not one of the Ancient Landmarks. It is required, of course, that some V. of the S.L. should be represented in the Lodges, but it may be any form of Sacred Law, according to the nationality and religious faith of the brethren concerned, such as, for instance, the Pentateuch, the Quràn, the Shasters, the Zenda-Vesta, etc., each Masonically conveying the same idea, that of the symbolism of the Divine will revealed to man. This explanation is necessary because there are brethren who persist in regarding Freemasonry as a religion, and who in the refectory often acclaim it as such, to the disparagement of recognised religious denominations - procedure which, while displaying their ignorance of the institution to which they belong, is to be deplored also for its possible menace to existing harmony.

Being an exposition of the Divine will as regards the building up of human character, the ethical system of Freemasonry naturally includes other essentials inseparable from such a scheme. Of these, as every brother is taught very early in his Masonic career, the principal are: Brotherly Love; Relief, and Truth. To the average Freemason these terms are so familiar that they trip off the tongue glibly enough. But how many of the brethren attempt to analyse the meaning of them, or even give to them but the most perfunctory attention and thought? Yet each one of these virtues provides scope for interesting investigation and study, and contains ample food for the enquiring mind. The truly Masonic jewels concealed under the mere surface definitions - Brotherly Love, Relief, and Truth - are only to be won by patient industry and search. These will well repay, because in the seeking the brother will discover much of benefit that might not otherwise have occurred to his mind. It may be that a new idea or conception of his responsibilities as an individual, quite apart from his recognised Masonic obligations, will present itself, and there may dawn upon him what unfortunately is so often forgotten, ignored; or unrealised of the ordinary Freemason, that the duty of carrying out in his life the tenets and principles of the Craft is not confined merely within the boundaries of the Masonic circle itself, but applies with equal cogeny to his relations to, and dealings with, all mankind.

What, then, do we understand by Brotherly Love? Considered as applying to our brethren of the Craft, it may be thus explained. Their one-ness with us results from a common obedience to the will of the Supreme Being, a common service directly for our institution, indirectly for humanity at large. It has its foundation in a community of aims and objects of a peculiarly high and ennobling character and in a common possession of certain privileges and secrets which distinguish it from the uninitiated. All these constitute the elements of a fraternity and induce feelings toward each other which are justly designated Brotherly Love. We show this in the toleration we exhibit toward them as regards the

conflict of varying religious and political views, as regards their harmless, but often pronounced, idiosyncrasies, eccentricities, and mannerisms. We demonstrate it in the unfeigned pleasure we find in their society; especially in the Lodgeroom, welcoming it as a haven of rest from the turmoil and disputes, the cares and worries of the outside world. We evince it in our willingness to assist ; them in any way possible to us and in our ready sympathy in time of trouble and adversity. We make their joy our happiness, their grief our sorrow. It is the natural result of the working within its of the principles and tenets of our revered j institution. Assuming this to be correctly deduced, there must consequentially be demanded of and by its a corresponding attitude toward our fellow-men in general, for we are all His creatures and, in a sense, brothers of one family. Toward all who are outside of the Craft, therefore, we should exhibit as genuine a sympathy, while taking an intelligent and beneficent interest in their progress and well-being. Tolerance should be our motto; kindness, tact, and courtesy our attributes; calm, unbiassed judgment the basis of our speech and actions. As Freemasons we should stand toward mankind in general as the messengers of Peace and Harmony, as types of those who have learned their duty toward their God, their neighbours, and themselves, and as good citizens. If we so stand before all men, then in our relations with them, while remaining true to our Masonic obligations; we shall treat them with a brotherly love and consideration, never judging harshly; however much we may disapprove, ever ready to help on the good cause and to check the evil tendency. Thus we cannot fail to exert that steady influence for good among men which, in its results, is the final collective expression outwardly of true Brotherly Love.

THE ESSENTIALS OF FREEMASONRY.-Continued.

Relief at first sight would seem to be peculiarly a Masonic essential, and one that would at once find ready acceptance by every true Freemason. It is generally associated with the idea of eleemosynary, or pecuniary, assistance. As such it belongs to the category of those distinctive and characteristic functions on the ready and efficient performance of which members of the Craft are wont to pride themselves. But it has a further, and fuller, and less sordid interpretation. There are often heard in connection with our ceremonies those beautiful and pathetic words: "To whom the burdened heart may pour out its sorrow. . ." That would seem to give the idea of Relief. Consider what it must be to one who is sore distressed, sore afflicted, to be able to lighten the soul's nigh intolerable burden by pouring forth its sorrow in the sympathetic ear of one who can feel therefor, and who will endeavour to mitigate it. Such should be a Freemason's privilege before all others. Or take the case of the unfortunate who has fallen from his high estate from some human weakness, or as the result of evil communications, and who finds himself friendless and without hope. Should not the Masonic duty, Relief, impel the brother having touch with such a case to tactfully endeavour by advice and admonition to lead such an one back to confidence in himself and the restoration of his self-respect? Thus instances might be multiplied demonstrating that Relief may be practised quite apart from merely pecuniary assistance.

The essential, Truth, is somewhat more complicated in its explanation. The word is used in a Masonic sense with a variety of applications. Sometimes it symbolises the Supreme Being being eternal, unchangeable, and sure to prevail, while what is mortal is perishable and mutable. Again, it, is used with reference to the working out of the mysteries of nature and science, as the search after Truth. Yet again, it is used in its ordinary sense, as in the words ` good and true," " true and trusty," meaning straightforward, dependable, free from what, is false, and therefore trustworthv. Generally speaking, it may be deemed sufficient to regard it in its popularly accepted meaning. But, even so, it has significations below the surface which may well be studied by the Masonic student. Truth stands for what it is, not for what it may seem for appearance sake, for what it may acquire, or for what it may achieve. Truth should in this respect symbolise the Freemason, and one could wish it always did ,o. But are we all what we seem? Is the outward man known to the world, the Lodge, and the brethren always the real man as he is? Very few of us, it may with confidence, but not uncharitably, be asserted, but would fail in the test were the mirror of Truth to reflect us before men as we. really are. To say this is merely to affirm that we are human beings, with all the frailties and imperfections of human nature. But undoubtedly the Masonic ideal requires of us to endeavour to enthrone Truth where now is falsity, to put away from (is all vain pretence and affectation, and to stand before men

stripped of all that is false and untrue. Truth in all things is demanded. That is the lesson inculcated by the third of these great principles of Freemasonry - Truth. We must cultivate it; by self examination and by self-discipline we must strive to attain to it. It is incumbent upon us if we are to profit by our building. For the scheme of Speculative Freemasonry is the building-up in each of the brethren of the spiritual temple, and obviously nothing that is false and untrue can find a place therein.

No dissertation on the essentials of Freemasonry would be complete without reference to that "which may justly be denominated the distinguishing characteristic" of every good Freemason's heart, charity. Concerning this divine attribute and sublime virtue, we are instructed that "it has the approbation both of heaven and of earth, and, like its sister, Mercy, blesses him who gives equally with him who receives." We are taught also to regard it as the highest rung in the ladder which, resting on the V. of the S.L., reaches even unto the G.L. above; and that "the Freemason who is possessed of this virtue in its most ample sense may justly be deemed to have attained the summit of his profession." It must be quite patent, therefore, to the thoughtful Freemason that this wonderful quality of charity does not mean solely the readiness to give of the material things of this world, excellent though that may be. A little consideration will demonstrate that this virtue, Charity, is to a large extent involved in the essentials, Brotherly Love and Relief. All our outlook upon, and our relations toward, mankind should be regulated by Charity. As Freemasons we should view charitably the actions of our fellow-men, and even their sayings and opinions. It is not for us to impute motives, to repeat the tale of scandal, to pass on the defamatory remark, or to speak disparagingly of any man. On the contrary, the Freemason's duty is to decline to recognise evil without proof, and even then to judge with mercy, to refuse to join in any chorus of defamation, and, where good cannot be said, to remain silent. It is his bounden duty to help men up, not keep them down-in all cases, in short, to do to others as he in similar circumstances would be done by. But a word is due also to the popularly accepted view of Charity-that of giving alms or the contribution for benevolent purposes. As is well known and freely recognised, Freemasonry stands pre-eminent in the Old World, more especially in England, for its magnificent and munificent undertakings in this connection. In this young country, by comparison, Freemasons have also done well as regards their benevolent acts and funds; but candour compels the admission that much more could have been accomplished without any undue straining of the quality of Charity. Masonic Charity, to be worthy of the fraternity, must be spontaneous, and only calculating in the sense that prudence should guide the brethren where the private interests of themselves and their family connections are involved. The contrast between the amounts expended by the large majority of Lodges on banquets, etc., and those contributed for charitable objects is still very striking. The brethren should always bear in mind that a hearty response to any and every call of a charitable nature is their chief and bounden duty, as it should be their pleasure and peculiar privilege.

There are other Masonic virtues, such as fidelity, obedience, prudence, secrecy, and temperance. These, however, are easily understood, and, as it were, speak for themselves. It may be assumed that the practice of them will naturally result to the Freemason; who by the observance of the principal essentials already enlarged upon gives proof of his sincerity and earnestness. As regards temperance, however, it may be explained that this does not in any way mean austerity in living, but simply a well-regulated moderation in all things, especially in the pleasures of life. Freemasonry does not stand for austerity. On the contrary, its social side is one of its most useful and attractive features. To quote our ritual, our Masonic duties having been discharged, we should " have but one aim in view, to be happy," and unite in the scheme of communicating happiness-the happiness, of course, resulting from a sense of things well done and duty performed.

A last, but by no means least, important Masonic essential-one apart from its ethical system, but rendered imperative by it - is the well-guarding of the portals of the Institution. All that has been said in this lecture must have demonstrated to the brethren the necessity for introducing into Freemasonry only good and true and suitable men. No one but the person concerned can accurately gauge the motives of one who seeks admission. It is true that he is required to state that he has a favourable opinion pre conceived of the Institution; but that is capable of various interpretations. It should be the duty of a brother, before proposing a candidate, to explain to him, very much in the terms of this lecture, what Freemasonry really is. He should be told that it is not merely a social club, but a serious

and solemn association for improving the morals and conduct of men. If the would-be candidate is so constituted as to hold the serious things of life in light estimation, then he will be no acquisition to Freemasonry. The default of such adequate explanation is, in my opinion, the true cause of so many brethren "dropping out" as soon almost as they have been initiated, disillusioned and out of sympathy with that which they never rightly understood.

Such are the basic tenets and principles-the main essentials - of Freemasonry. Sequentially they are the essentials which should guide and mould the conduct of the Freemason. As in the case with other societies and associations of men, Freemasonry is judged by the profane or outside world, not by its best, but by its worst exponents. A Masonic writer has forcefully said that Freemasonry has no greater enemy than the unworthy brother within its own ranks. The honour and reputation of the Craft are in the keeping of each and all of us. Therefore, it behoves every brother to stand fast by his professions. He should "measure his actions by the rule of rectitude, square his conduct by the principles of morality, and guide his inclinations, and even his thoughts, within the compass of propriety." So shall these tenets and principles be transmitted pure and unpolluted to our successors, and from generation to generation.