

## *Chapter 8*

### *Earthquake, Wind and Fire*

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*Imitate Hollywood. Stage an extravaganza. Bring in all the groups that ever fancied themselves remotely related to Freemasonry. Form the parade, blow the bugle, beat the drums, and cheapen the Fraternity.*

**HIGH ON MY** list of favorite stories is the Old Testament account of Elijah's experience in his wilderness cave.<sup>1</sup> I could not get through *Whither Are We Traveling?* without telling it, nor can I drive home my point in this series of articles without recalling the lesson demonstrated so vividly and so forcefully before the eyes of the prophet on Mount Horeb.

Like many of us, Elijah had become discouraged over what appeared to be a hopeless situation. About him he could see only decline and decay of moral and spiritual values. Recounting how God's covenants had been forsaken, His altars desecrated and His prophets slain, Elijah was convinced that only he had remained faithful to his trust. "I, even I only, am left!" he cried out in despair. Then come those stately lines that I never read without experiencing a thrill:

*And behold, the Lord passed by,*

*And a great and strong wind rent the mountains,*

*And brake in pieces the rocks before the Lord;*

*But the Lord was not in the wind:*

*And after the wind an earthquake;*

*But the Lord was not in the earthquake:*

*And after the earthquake a fire;*

*But the Lord was not in the fire:*

*And after the fire a still, small voice.*

**AND SO IT WAS** that the Ancient of Days spoke to Elijah, and to us. From the clouds lingering about a present-day Mount Horeb, I like to think His admonition would be phrased in simple, direct American slang, something like this:

"Simmer down, Elijah! Don't expect a celestial blast-off to signal the workings of My eternal plan. I don't operate that way. My method is to work quietly and patiently—you

know, like the leaven in a lump of dough. I do it the hard way!"

**AND INDEED**, is not that what we tell those who knock at our doors in search of Masonic Light ? "Freemasonry erects its temples within the hearts of men," we say to them. "Through the improvement and strengthening of the character of the *individual man*, Freemasonry seeks to improve the community," we affirm, and then with sonorous boast we add, "The design of the Masonic Institution is to make its votaries wiser, better and consequently happier."

Then why are we so impatient to deny by our actions that which we proclaim with our words?

Why are we so restless? Why do we bite our individual and collective nails in travail, trying to give birth to some extravagant Hollywood-type production to call attention to ourselves—an act which by its very nature is the antithesis of Freemasonry?

After all, the leaven in the dough is something that does its work without the flashing of lights or the ringing of bells. It cannot even be seen with the naked eye. Why, then are we so consumed with the ambition to stage an earthquake to end all earthquakes, a wind to end all winds, a fire to end all fires? Are we laboring under the delusion that the erection of a temple within the heart of a man will attract favorable notice if we buy enough advertising space, or assemble a large enough crowd, or make a loud enough noise?

**EVEN THOUGH I HAVE** no patience with the spectacle itself, there *is* something about the word *wing-ding* that I like. The dictionaries have not yet taken cognizance of it; but they should, and I trust they may before too long.

For wing-ding has become an expressive word in the American language—a word which carries a message no other word can convey. It means a big splurge, a great extravaganza, a huge bit of Barnum-like showmanship which today brings out the crowds, the flags and the bands, and tomorrow is gone and forgotten.

Anyone who knows anything about Freemasonry would suppose that our Craft would be the last to experiment with wing-dings, for they are utterly foreign to Masonic philosophy. But here and there we see signs that the temptation has been too great:

—A contest to see how many men, women and children can be crowded under one roof to eat breakfast on an occasion labeled as a "Masonic" function.

—A mammoth effort to get thousands of human beings of all ages, sexes, sizes and shapes (and wearing every conceivable type of regalia) into a parade, and then to jam-pack them into an arena. This, too, is billed as a "Masonic" event.

—A Grand Master looking with longing eyes across State lines and pleading with his Grand Lodge for funds with which to stage a similar wing-ding and thereby keep up with the neighboring Joneses.

Indiana has not succumbed to the urge to produce a wing-ding, and thank Heaven for that! It is a tribute to our Masonic leadership in the Hoosier State, and indeed, to the leadership of most American Jurisdictions, that the Big Spectacle is shunned as an activity incompatible with the dignity of Freemasonry.

**TEMPTING THOUGH IT** may be to show off before the public, *this is something we had better think through*. When we do think, as Freemasons should now and then, we begin to see some byproducts of the wing-ding that do not appear on the surface:

**1. Let's face it: The wing-ding is not designed to promote loyalty to the basic unit of Freemasonry, nor is that its purpose.**

Billed as a "Masonic" event, the Big Spectacle is about as Masonic as the State Fair. Women, children, teen-agers, "dependent" organizations, uniformed groups whose members rarely darken the door of a Masonic Lodge and would not know how to act if they did—all these thrive on the opportunity to dress up and be seen. The net result is that Symbolic Freemasonry is pushed far into the background. The wing-ding becomes no more than a mass rally of hangers-on (except, of course, that the Lodges are given the honor of paying the bill).

One time not too many years ago I was an eyewitness to one of these fabulous spectacles in which a Grand Lodge was sold a costly bill of goods, and apparently for no purpose other than to give "dependent" groups an opportunity to parade before the television cameras. The manner in which Lodges of Freemasons were relegated to the back seat on that occasion was no less than an insult.

**2. The wing-ding is a lazy way of doing things.** It is a great splash in one place, for just one day, and then it is heard no more for another twelve months. It seeks to accomplish in one day and in one place what Masonic leadership is unwilling to do within the framework of its Lodges the other 364 days in the year.

In Indiana, we have chosen to remember that Masons meet in almost every village and town in the Hoosier State, and on almost every night in the week, rather than in a crowded coliseum on one hot summer day. Thus far, we have chosen to do our work among Freemasons in their Lodges, out where the Brethren live. I hope and pray it may be ever thus.

And if that means living in a horse-and-buggy era of decentralized operation where individuals and local Lodges are regarded as having some importance, then the defendant pleads guilty and is proud to affirm that that is exactly the way individual Masons and Lodges should be treated.

**3. The net result of the wing-ding is to cheapen the Fraternity.** The man who is ambitious to ride behind the bands in an open convertible and to make a speech to the masses in competition with the popcorn vendors should look at the spectacle through the eyes of the non-Masonic public. He should read some Masonic history. In particular I can recommend a careful study of that period in the 18th Century when mock processions were staged in London in derision of the Freemasons. Then, let the Brother

who yearns for the klieg lights ask himself this question: If processions that were dignified and strictly Masonic appeared ridiculous to Londoners in the 18th Century, how utterly silly must the "coeducational" family-type productions labeled as "Masonic" appear to Americans today?

Not many of our Brethren are willing to be honest with themselves these days, but those who are will recognize that our Fraternity is constantly being made to suffer humiliation before the public because of a multitude of extraneous organizations which claim relationship to Freemasonry, but which actually detract from its dignity and effectiveness.

**4. When we resort to the Big Spectacle to advertise our wares, we must be prepared for the day when the Big Spectacle is a fizzle.** I remember when one American Jurisdiction used to stage annually what was claimed to be the largest tyled Lodge meeting in the world. It attracted Masons by the thousands. I have heard nothing about it for several years. In all probability the time came when it was no longer a novelty.

Then, annually, I used to receive notices of a mammoth rock quarry gathering in one of the Southern States. It also drew crowds up into the thousands. It is my understanding that the project was abandoned because it became so large it got: completely out of hand.

Bear in mind, these were *Masonic* occasions—not mass meetings.

At least one distinguished American Masonic leader is doing some thinking on the subject. He told me not long ago that the wing-ding in his Jurisdiction is due to be given a quiet and decent burial, and thereupon will be forgotten. "I do not relish the thought of being the man in command when the day of failure comes," he told me.

**5. Worst of all, the wing-ding is a denial of all our Craft is trying to teach and to do.** Freemasonry is a peculiar institution. Countless individuals never seem to be able to understand that we do not operate in the manner of other organizations. Even Masons themselves in great numbers are unable to comprehend what it is all about. Unwilling to adjust themselves to the Fraternity, they want the Fraternity to adjust itself to their whims.

More than thirty years ago a Masonic writer saw the trend all too clearly when he observed:<sup>2</sup>

"It would seem that we have erred by ignoring one of our oldest landmarks, that of secrecy. We have suffered from the press agent and from the public newspaper fraternal pages. Our craft has become blended in the public mind with the screams of eagles, the bellowing of moose and the hooting of owls.

"For Freemasonry was born to the task of cleansing and quieting the hearts of men; of furnishing a sanctuary from strife and toil where Craftsmen might lay aside selfishness and drink the pure waters that have run down to us through the centuries."

Yes, the dignity of the individual and his importance in the eternal scheme of things . . . the erection of a moral edifice within the heart of a man . . . the spiritual bulwark which gives a Freemason that strength of character to *know his duty* as a citizen without being instructed what to think and how to vote . . . all these qualities are not instilled by mass action, nor parades, nor bands, nor fireworks.

**I HOPE TO SEE** the day when American Freemasons begin to think and act a little more like Freemasons. Yes, and I hope to see the day when we can exercise greater dignity and restraint—when again we can operate as Masons without calling in the ladies and the children, the junior leagues, the barons and lords and sheiks and emperors!

A Grand Master of Masons in Missouri<sup>3</sup> said all this with such eloquent feeling that I am moved to propose his words as a credo for American Freemasonry in this mid-Twentieth Century:

"It ought to be our ambition that the world in future will say that Freemasons of this age were truthful when truth was almost everywhere assailed;

"That they were honest—with each other and all the world—when intrinsic honesty was openly questioned . . .

"That they gave great thoughts and great minds to great purposes when other great minds wasted themselves on petty fancies and selfish ambitions;

"That they were modest and fine and delicate when to be loud and coarse were sadly too common . . .

"That they showed dauntless courage when hope and courage were languishing in the hearts of men . . .

"That they built true character, even though they wrought not with their hands in stone and wood!"

To that majestic litany of hope, surely with one voice we can respond, *So mote it be!*

<sup>1</sup> I Kings 19: 7-21.

<sup>2</sup> Lewis R. Decker in "The Master Mason," Sept. 1928.

<sup>3</sup> George W. Walker, 1937.