

Chapter 12

An Army On Foot

THE HARD WAY IS THE MASONIC WAY

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Concluding "Confusion", the author asserts that in seeking to make Freemasonry large and affluent and easy we also can make it ineffective in present-day society.

"**WHAT COME YOU** here to do?" the Entered Apprentice is asked. With an eagerness as glib as it is unthinking he replies, "To improve myself in Masonry."

He seeks to improve himself, he says. Not a word about improving anyone else; no mention whatever of improving the community, or the government of the United States, or that of any other nation in the world, or of the world itself.

Note in particular that his expressed motive is not to improve Freemasonry, but rather to improve a Mason—and not some other Mason, but himself.

As an Entered Apprentice he is admitted into a Lodge of Freemasons for the first time to say, in effect, with becoming humility, "Here am I, a rough ashlar in need of improvement. Place your working tools in my hands and teach me their uses, that I may apply them in my labors to become a perfect ashlar."

As he progresses through the ceremonies of the three degrees, he hears a great deal about self-improvement. In the character of a Freemason he is expected to make his body a living stone for a spiritual building—his own body. He receives a gauge, a common gavel, a square, a plumb, all to be used for the improvement of his own condition first, and then, through him, the condition of others.

BUT ONCE RAISED to the sublime degree and invested with its emblems, he finds that his desire to "improve myself" has been given an entirely different interpretation. No longer is it the slow, patient process of chipping off the corners and ugly excesses of his own nature to make a rough ashlar perfect. Now he is assured that he can improve himself in Masonry by choosing one or more of several formulae. "Memorize this lecture," one Brother will demand. "Read this booklet," admonishes another. "Come to Lodge," a third will plead. "Sign this petition," insists a fourth. Improving oneself in Masonry suddenly has become as simple and as easy as that!

And then after awhile he hears his restless Brethren saying that *Freemasonry*—not Masons—needs to be improved, and with infinite conceit suggesting it is up to them to do the improving!

How seldom do we hear the calm voice of dear old Mr. Mason (there is at least one in every Lodge), and how desperately do we need to hear his words of gentle suasion: "My Brother, you have come here to improve yourself, you say. You will have countless opportunities for self-improvement in Freemasonry, yet you may fail to recognize most of them. For there is nothing flashy about the erection of a moral edifice within the heart of a man. It is so simple that many Masons miss the point entirely. Neither is there anything easy about it. On the contrary, the Masonic way is so difficult it is seldom tried. It will be a full-time job—the hardest job you have ever tackled—but of all life's experiences, few will be richer."

BY NOW THE THEME of this concluding article should be plain: Freemasonry has no problems that cannot be solved by Freemasonry. Indeed, the only solution to Freemasonry's problems is Freemasonry. Our Craft has adjusted itself before; it can do so again, and it need not lose its soul in the doing.

That there is confusion in the temple, few will deny. That the state of confusion is caused by inferior designs on the trestleboard I, for one, fervently believe. With a thoroughly mixed-up sense of values we get all itchy over the thought of "improvements" that should be made to modernize our noble Craft. The way to change human lives is to change human systems, we try to persuade ourselves, as we parrot the environmental philosophy of the Shallow Sixties now being expounded on all sides by persons who also are confused.

But when we sort things out in the order of their relative importance, we begin to see that the improvement needed so sorely is not in Masonry, but in *Masons*; that whatever weaknesses may appear in the chain are brought about by weak links. Then, as the picture comes into focus, we are reminded that the way to change human systems is to change human lives. That sounds more like Freemasonry.

A JEREMIAD IS NEVER a popular theme. Freemasons in particular do not like to stand before the mirror and see imperfections and shortcomings, nor do we like to be summoned to return to basic principles. Regardless of the direction in which we may be headed, we like to fancy we are moving forward. But there comes a time when "Forward March" can be a suicidal command; there are occasions when it is the part of wisdom to shout, "Halt! About Face! Forward March!"

No, the message of a Jeremiah is not pleasant, and seldom is it received with acclaim. To emphasize the hard way instead of the easy way, the importance of the individual instead of the mass, individual responsibility instead of Lodge responsibility, Lodge responsibility instead of Grand Lodge responsibility, a favorable image created by the lives of Master Masons instead of one manufactured by news media—this is not soothing music to the ear. But we cannot escape the fact that such a way is the *Masonic* way.

Why are we so fearful?

Because there is a tapering off of the membership curve and a dearth of interest. Ill-gotten gains of the nineteen-forties are not holding up. Once we rushed men through the

degrees with reckless abandon; now they are not lining up to be loaded onto the conveyor belt. Temples that were humming with activity in the 'forties are quiet as a tomb in the 'sixties. Then our Lodge rooms and banquet halls were filled to overflowing with Master Masons on just about every occasion; now we have to bring in the ladies and children to get a crowd large enough to justify the expense of opening the building. Our sins are catching up with us. We have found that there is such a thing as Masonic inflation as well as inflation of the currency; that the penalty of Masonic inflation is Masonic devaluation—and that the penalty must be paid.

If it is consolation we are looking for, there is precious little to be found in the knowledge that most human institutions are having like troubles maintaining a healthy interest and activity these days, and that even those institutions which claim to be divine are fighting the air, uncertain which way to turn or what to try next.

Ignoring the lessons of our own history, the most discouraging aspect of our era of apathy is that, turn wheresoever we may, we are urged to experiment with just about everything under the sun except Freemasonry; to discard the usages and customs and traditions that have set our Craft apart and made it distinctive; to pattern the Fraternity after fleeting fads and fancies as changeable as the model of a motor car.

WHY SHOULD THERE be confusion in the temple? Why are we in search of bright ideas and prescriptions? Freemasonry has one mission on this earth and only one. Let him who asks what that mission is pause to reflect that in asking the question he confesses that he has missed the point of it all.

The mission of our gentle Craft is not to be another service club, or another civic league, or another pseudo-political pressure group. It is not to be another flag-waving society of super-patriots, or another agency to alleviate the physical ills of the human race, or another co-educational Friendly Neighbors Circle devoted to cozy and inane "togetherness." The woods in these parts are filled with such organizations. They are a dime a dozen. They are doing the work for which they were formed and doing it very well.

Why cannot Freemasons do likewise? Why can we not content ourselves with simply doing the work of our Craft? No other organized society on the face of the earth can do the work of Freemasonry except Freemasonry. Why do we not stick to our knitting?

The reason, I believe, is that we have become victims of a kind of brainwashing which protests that our ways are too slow, too quiet, too difficult, too old-fashioned. "This is the Twentieth Century," says the New Ideology. "Unless we are increasing in numbers and material wealth we are on the decline; we must have the last word in temples and institutions; we must make a big noise to call attention to ourselves and get people to talking about us; we must devise means whereby we can do things the quick way, the easy way, and get on to something else."

But there is no quick way and no easy way to erect temples within the hearts of men. There are no mass production methods, no huge conveyor belts on which men may be loaded to have the roughness chipped away and the smooth and perfect ashlar emerge

therefrom. A great Freemason, General Lew Wallace, in his *Ben-Hur*, observed that "When God Walks the earth, His steps are often centuries apart." The making of a Mason is a process almost that deliberate; the work of our gentle Craft is an effort that must be pursued slowly and with limitless patience—and it must be done *the hard way*, for there is no other way to execute the designs on our trestleboard.

IN HIS GREAT NOVEL, *The Robe*, Lloyd C. Douglas has a powerful scene which illustrates the point I have tried to make in almost every article and editorial I have written in recent years. The old Roman emperor Tiberius is speculating on the probable outcome of the peculiar Christian movement then getting under way. It would eventually disintegrate, he predicted, just as soon as it began to be successful and strong. Then, with prophetic words that sounded as if he might be talking about Freemasonry instead of Christianity, he clinches the nail:

"The Christian afoot is a formidable fellow— but—when he becomes prosperous enough to ride a horse—' Tiberius suddenly broke out in a startling guffaw—'He! he! he!—When he gets a horse! Ho! ho! ho!—a Christian on horseback will be just like any other man on horseback! This Jesus army will have to travel on foot if it expects to accomplish anything!'"

There simply is no effortless way for Freemasons to do the work of Freemasonry. When we are performing the noble tasks to which we have obligated ourselves our job is never easy, never popular, never fashionable, and we are never in the majority. The reason is plain: the work of a Mason must be done *the hard way* or it avails nothing. As the old emperor would put it, a Mason prosperous enough to ride a horse will be of little effect, for a Mason on horseback is just like any other man on horseback.

ONCE BEFORE I made the plea: Let's try Freemasonry. Now I renew that plea, for I have seen nothing superior to it, and I glory in these years of adversity that may bring us to our senses with the reawakening we must have if our Craft is to remain a vital force in human society.

And so I come to the end of my explorations in the morass of confusion with no pat answers and no sure-cure prescriptions to offer, proposing only that we do the work of Freemasonry and that we do it in the manner of Freemasons. That means, among other things, an agonizing reappraisal of our worship of bigness and wealth and material things, our passion for efficiency and know-how and quick results and public acclaim. The philosophy of Freemasonry properly applied is a power that works as slowly, as quietly and as irresistibly as a grain of seed sprouting in the earth.

If we have become so busy, so highly organized and centralized and standardized and mechanized and institutionalized that the individual Mason no longer counts for anything, then let's use the scissors on our rituals and cut out such obsolete trivia as those promises to help, aid and assist ... to fly to the relief of a Brother ... to remember a Brother's welfare ... to stretch forth our hands to assist and support... to go on foot and out of our way!

As American Freemasons it is time we were making up our minds what it is we have come here to do. If we are here for the noble purpose we once proclaimed so readily, then we must face the sobering fact that our assignment is the improvement of *ourselves*—not Freemasonry.

And unless we want our Craft to pass into that limbo where things of no further use or necessity are relegated, we had better learn to shift from overdrive into low gear—to become interested in men as individuals. Then, logically, the next step is to pull out to one side of the road, bring our fast, high-powered vehicle to a stop, and get out and walk—to do the work of a Mason *the hard way*.

For the "Masonic army" is in precisely the same position as the "Jesus army." As old Tiberius so sagely observed, it must travel on foot if it expects to accomplish anything.

¹ Lloyd C. Douglas, *The Robe* (Houghton Mifflin Company). Quoted by permission of publisher.