

The Masonic Service Association

By Unknown

I

Almost five years have now come and gone since The Masonic Service Association of the United States was organized. It grew out of a deep need and a fine impulse. The need which demanded it still exists; the impulse which created it is still alive and active. Something has been attempted, and something done.

How keenly the need was felt five years ago need not be dwelt upon. The plain, not to say disconcerting, fact was that Masonry had not come off very well in the Great War, because it had not found out how to function as a whole. It was not united. The truth is that it had never been united. The discovery that an united Masonry was unequal to the demands of a time of crisis was startling. Craft Masonry was aroused, and thoughtful men began to lay large and long plans against the future, lest Masonry be found wanting again.

A Masonic Service Association was proposed. There were good and true men who said that such a thing was impossible, and could not be. For one thing, it was an innovation. It had never been done before. Other orders were united and active, but Masonry seemed to be handicapped by its own organization and tradition. But where there is a will there is a way, and when necessity demands, a way can be found.

Of the necessity there was no doubt at all. Facts do not threaten; they operate. Multitudes of facts fairly shouted the demand for some kind of concerted action if Masonry was to be an effective force in the life and service of the nation. Those facts still stand as stubbornly as ever. Many difficulties have been overcome, but all the suspicions have not been allayed.

None the less, in spite of all difficulties and vicissitudes, the Service Association is a fact. It is here in the face of those who said it was impossible. It lives, grows and gathers power in spite of those who say it is a fad, a failure and a futility. Today the Service Association is the greatest united undertaking in the history of American Masonry, seeking to make speculative Masonry operative by making it cooperative. It is the outstanding fact in Craft Masonry in this land, and no one can ponder its potentialities without feeling that Masonry can be a mighty conservative and constructive power in the future of our country, and not simply an order to belong to.

Anybody can find fault. It needs no talent to tear down.

Even a blind man can see difficulties. But those who would be Builders must have courage, sagacity, patience; and the greatest of these is patience. Mistakes have been made, but they are such errors as attend every new movement which attempts to go where no path has been made, and do what has not been done before. To attempt nothing is the greatest mistake of all.

As the spirit and purpose of the Association are better understood, it wins its way. Its organization is unique. It is in now sense a General Grand Lodge, and never can be. It is not even a Federation of Grand Lodges. Indeed, it is less an institution than an agency, an instrumentality whereby the member Jurisdictions do together, in fellowship and common purpose, what none can do so well alone. It is most interesting to watch Masonry trying to do what other fraternities do with ease and success.

A very able brother writes in a letter as follows: "It strikes one as very strange that Masons, of all men, should find it so hard to get together and work together. Why is it so? They have more in common and are held by a stronger tie than other men, as has been shown many times and in many ways. Why, then, so many suspicions, envies and fears? What must one think of Masonry, if Masons cannot trust one another and work shoulder to shoulder in behalf of the wider influence of their own Craft?"

The letter goes on: "It makes one wonder what kind of men Masons really are, anyway. If one did not know that our lodges are made up of men of intelligence, who in business and affairs do big things in big ways, one might think they are petty, penurious, tight-wads. The Service association asks each Mason for five cents! A whole nickel! Not even the price for a bad cigar! Yet there are those who balk at it, thinking it wild extravagance! While another Order, not at all friendly to our spirit and principals, has its own building and headquarters in Washington city and conducts its propaganda with sleepless vigilance and tireless enterprise! "The truth is," continues the letter, "our work for years has been confined almost wholly to the making of Masons, and we have hardly thought at all of what can and ought to be done with our Masonry. Aside from our charities – and they are not supported as they should be – Masonry has done almost nothing. It has not even fulfilled its own injunctions; To set the Craft at Work, Giving them Proper Instruction For Their Labor. Only a few know the Ritual, and fewer still know anything about the history, philosophy or symbolism of the Craft. It is very strange, and I do not know how to make it out!"

So writes a brother who himself only recently discovered the Service Association, and is by turns elated and depressed. When first made a Mason, he says, he was full of Zeal. After a time his ardor began to cool, and for years has been only a nominal Mason, paying his dues and going occasionally to lodge. No one seemed to take Masonry seriously, or to think it meant anything outside of the lodge, and so he lost interest – like a multitude of others.

Today he is enthusiastic and impatient, not realizing that all large bodies move slowly, and that only a few ever see what can be and ought to be done. He forgets that not half our people belong to any church. Hardly half of them ever vote at all, for anybody or anything. Laws must be passed compelling children to be sent to school. What wonder, then, that Masons should share the common inertia? We must be patient, and do what can be done to awaken interest and bestir effort.

The Masonic Service Association is a beginning, and what it can do has hardly been dreamed, much less attempted. None of the dark suspicions which surrounded its birth have materialized. None of them will. They were the shadows of fear, not the light of faith. The purposes of the Association are clearly stated, its limits plainly defined. Let us consider something of what the Association means, what it has done, what it is now doing, and what it can and ought to do in the service of the Craft and the Country.

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Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That sends the frozen ground-swell under it,
And spills the upper boulders in the sun;
That makes gaps even two men can pass abreast.

These lines from a poem by Robert Frost have been much in our mind of late, while thinking of our Masonic Service Association. The poem tells of two old friends in New England, where fences are made of stone, living side by side, friends and neighbors. Both took pride in keeping the stone wall, or fence, between them high, tight and in repair; not because they were enemies but in obedience to the doctrine of their fathers, handed down from time immemorial, that "Good Fences make Good Neighbors."

But the wall wouldn't stay fixed. The winter frost buckled the earth up, overturning the wall, making a lot of work and trouble. No one had seen or heard the gaps made, but at spring mending-time they were there – wide gaps, as if some unseen power had been trying to tear the wall down. The poem shows us the two old farmers standing one on one side of the wall and the other on the other, studying what the winter had done to their wall. Finally one of them sees new truth:

Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offence.
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down.

Looking about to see what need there is for a wall at all, they discover that on one side there is an orchard and on the other side some pine trees. Now, pine trees do not run away, nor do apple trees molest pine trees. There are no cows or pigs to cross and invade – just trees which stay put where they stand. then why have a wall at all when there is no need of it? But the farmer who sees this fact cannot get his neighbor to see it, though he puts the matter plainly enough:

My apple trees will never get across
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him, He only says,
"Good fences make good neighbors." If I could put a notion in his head;

"Why do they make good neighbors? Isn't it
Where are the cows? But here there are no cows."
But all in vain; his neighbor did not see the point. Instead, he kept on bringing stones and piling
them on the wall; kept on repeating the saying of his father, "Good fences make good
neighbors" – wise in its day, perhaps, but having no meaning in the face of new facts. So the old
farmer gives it up as a hopeless job, and picks up the stones on his side of the fence: Oh, just
another kind of out-door game, One on a side. It comes to little more;

There where it is we do not need a wall. The poem is a parable of Blue Lodge Masonry in
America.

Time out of mind we have built walls between our Grand Lodges – perhaps they were needed in
other days but they are no longer of any use. There are no enemies to cross and invade our
rights and sovereignties. Trees stay where they stand. No one has the least idea of obliterating a
line, much less of molesting a neighbor. Still, the walls stand and we are careful to keep them
high, tight and in repair.

There are Correspondence Reports, to be sure, but they are read by only a few. The mass of
Masons in one Jurisdiction have little idea of what is thought or done in another Jurisdiction.
Many times we have seen a visitor, or a delegation of visitors from one Grand Lodge received
in another Grand Lodge; and, in spite of the dignity and solemnity of the ceremonies, we had all
kinds of funny thoughts. Often the visitors were men known all over the Masonic world, and yet
one would have thought they were men from another nation, if not another race. Much as we
love ceremony, and propriety, such distant and diplomatic formality between brethren is rather
amusing.

So our Grand Lodges went on, until something happened – something sudden, terrifying,
bewildering. The Great War shook the earth, shattering many a well-built theory; it crumpled up
the ground beneath our neatly erected walls, tumbling them down and making gaps big enough
for a tourist elephant with baggage to pass through. In an unmistakable, not to say humiliating,
way American Craft Masonry learned the truth the old farmer learned:

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down. Unfortunately not all of our
brethren learned the lesson.

Some Grand Lodges still keep their walls intact, as if they were afraid of their brethren on the
other side. But a number of Jurisdictions clasped hands across broken walls and formed the
Masonic Service Association: The first tentative attempt of Craft Masonry in this country to
think and work together. It is a beginning, if nothing more, and it is full of promise if we have
patience, wisdom and mutual trust; and good-will to hold together long enough to do what
needs to be done. Unless we are ready to see it through, it is idle to go on.

Some of us, however, are unwilling to admit that Masons cannot unite and carry through a great enterprise in behalf of the wider influence and higher efficiency of their Craft. Two things are vitally necessary: First, the consciousness of our unity as American Masons; and second, active and earnest cooperation. Without these two things the effort is futile. Yet these are the things we have not yet secured. They cannot be made out of hand; they must grow, and they will grow together, each helping to create the other. And it takes time for things to grow; and, patience and cultivation; and we must wait and work.

For let it be remembered that the Masonic Service Association is undertaking something that has never been done before in America, or anywhere else. It cannot be done all at once. Nor can it be done by a few men who happen to be officers. It must be done slowly by experiment – not without mistake, if we judge by all other human undertakings – and it must be done together. No man, or set of men, however able and wise, can devise out of hand a plan or program to meet the case. There must, of course, be a tentative program, but it is only tentative; it must be thought out, worked out, tried out and modified as need requires; and adapted to conditions.

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Which brings us to consider the program we have as it now stands. It is a valuable and comprehensive program, not perfect by any means, but useful in that it helps to visualize what needs to be done. Some of us think it is too academic; and naturally so, because the whole problem was sat first academic, as every such problem is. It could not be otherwise. Every problem of the kind is first academic, then experimental, and finally a practical and workable solution is found. As a piece of machinery our program is admirable, making use of books, bulletins, speakers, moving pictures, lecturers, journals – nearly every agency at command, so far as it gets an opportunity to be heard and used.

With these things we shall deal more in detail later. Just now we wish to say, what is obvious and self-evident, that no program – though it were devised by omniscience – can do any good unless it is tried and used. Cooperation, not merely well-wishing – uttered in the eloquence of the Grand Orator at the meeting of the Grand Lodge – but actual organized cooperation is what is needed. A member Jurisdiction which does not put on a program – adapting it to its own uses and conditions, as it should – cannot hope to obtain results. To fail to use the program and at the same time criticize the Association, is a strange proceeding. It is like buying garden seed and never planting them, and getting vexed because they do not bloom and grow.

Here again we must be patient. The whole movement toward Masonic education is new, comparatively – at least in its present attempt to reach the rank and file of the Craft, where it is most needed. Heretofore Masonic study was the fad, or hobby, or labor of a few who loved to delve into quaint and curious questions of ancient lore. Only within a few years have we come to feel the desire or need that the necessity for it is becoming widely felt. And it has been so long neglected that it is hard to find room and a place for it. The lodge are so busy conferring

degrees that it is difficult to allow time for any instruction beyond what is found in the Ritual. When the need is more deeply and widely felt these details will be worked out easily.

The present writer may fairly lay claim to an interest in Masonic education, and he has learned a few things about it. The book called "The Builders," if written today, would be a very different book from what it is, simpler and more elementary. Well do we remember the hot summer when the book was written, and the many letters from Past Master Block, who was chiefly responsible for the undertaking; many of them after this manner:

"Chop the Fodder Fine. Cut it into small pieces so the boys will get it. Not many know anything beyond the Ritual, and few know even that." We thought he underestimated the knowledge of Masons; but, he was right and we were wrong. There has yet to be written the right kind of Masonic primer; it is not easy to write, but it must be done.

At times we are inclined to think that the key to the whole matter of Masonic education – such as we now have in mind – lies in the custom which was used to prevail in the Scottish Lodges, to which the late Brother McBride owed his knowledge of Masonry and his enthusiasm for it. It was the wise custom in those days for the Master of the Lodge to appoint an instructor – an "Intender," as he was called – for each initiate, to coach him not only in the Ritual, but also to give him an elementary training in the history, symbolism, laws and customs of the Craft. Finally, we hope, every lodge will have its "Intenders," as they used to be have in Scotland, and it should be the business of a lodge, if not the Grand Lodge, to discover and develop these teachers of Masonry for the training of young men in a knowledge of Masonry.

Howbeit, we have wandered from the point, to which we intend to return in further bulletin, taking up more in detail the work of the Association. It is the greatest work American Masonry has attempted, and it should command the best thought and the finest cooperative endeavor of all who love Freemasonry and wish to see its good, wise and beautiful truth grow and bear fruit in the future of America.

IV

Apart from the founding of the "Master Mason," an outstanding achievement of the Association during the year, has been its service in the development of Masonic literature upon a new basis and in a new setting. What this means is more readily realized by those who are familiar with what the literature of the Craft has been in the past, both as to its contents and its format.

By this we do not mean any depreciation of the writers and publishers of other days. They did valiant and able work under very great difficulties, and we owe them a vast debt. However, the books put out – many of them, at least – when worthy of the Craft in their contents, were most unattractive in the form in which they were printed. They seemed to be old and freakish; almost eccentric, not to say ugly and uninviting to the student and reader.

In England, not a few Masonic books have been issued by great publishing houses, and distributed through the regular avenues of the book trade. Yet even in England the Masonic publishing houses, for the most part, still hold by a format and design which can hardly be said to tempt readers who are not already interested in the subjects with which they deal. Unless books are printed as if they are alive and interesting they will not be read by men who are alive and busy.

For the first time in America the Masonic Service Association secured the cooperation, energy and enterprise of a great publishing house in the service of the Craft, and so much must be set down to its credit. It means a new kind of Masonic literature, in a new form and with a new appeal; carrying the message and meaning of the Craft far beyond its own membership. It means that Masonry takes its place and makes its contribution to the thought and aspiration of the world, alongside other orders and movements making for a better human brotherhood.

Today the world is a whispering gallery and a hall of mirrors where everything is heard and seen. Never were the agencies for the spread of truth – or error – so many and so marvelous. Within a few moments an idea, a fact or an event; whether important or insignificant, is sent to the ends of the earth. If Masonry has anything to say to mankind now is the time to say it. How often the Grand Orator has told us that the teachings of Masonry, if known and applied by humanity, would heal the hurts of the race and bring a new day in which brotherliness reigns. If that is so, then we have an opportunity to tell the world a truth it needs to know. There are those of course, who think of Masonry as so unique and peculiar that all its teaching should be kept hidden in the Lodge, to be known only by its initiates. Not so. The day is long gone by when any man or set of men can claim to have a private scheme of the universe to be tucked away in a corner. Such a claim may flatter our conceit, but it makes the Craft ridiculous in the eyes of thinking men. Masonry is not, strictly speaking, a secret order at all. It is a private order, but private only in its method of teaching, not in what it does teach – private also in its signs and tokens behind which it hides its beautiful charity from the gaze of a curious world. No. Universality is the sole test of truth, and the whole emphasis of Masonry is upon universal truths – the universal Fatherhood of God, the universal Brotherhood of Man, the universal authority of the Moral Law and the universal Hope of Immortality. To attempt to limit any of these truths, to build a fence around them as some ecclesiastics are wont to try to do is like trying to shut up Spring in a garden or Winter in the woodshed. In ancient times men kept the highest truths secret, but that time is gone, never to return.

But, more specifically and to the point, if we are to have any Masonic education worthy of the name, manifestly we must have books to be read and studied. And they must be books that are accurate, authentic and attractive else they will not be read. Anyone familiar with Masonic literature can testify that most of the books hitherto published – with many notable exceptions – were neither authentic nor attractive. They were filled with the wildest tales and the most weird speculations as to the origin of the order and the meaning of its symbols. So much so, indeed,

that one was tempted to say that Masonic symbolism was that part of Masonry about which no two men agreed – as philosophy was recently defined as that activity where the greatest amount of disagreement reigns amongst those who follow it.

Surely, in view of these facts, the Association is entitled to credit for having prepared the way for a different kind of Masonic study, either by individuals or by groups, by giving the Craft a literature worthy of its history and its purpose. Clearly if we are to instruct young Masons in the history, symbolism and laws of the Craft we must have books with which to do it – and for that reason, if for no other, the M.S.A. National Masonic Library is a memorable achievement. It is, indeed, the fulfillment of a dream which some of us had as far back as 1913, but remained unrealized until this day.

In all parts of the country, in non-member jurisdictions as well as Grand Lodges in the Association – in South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and England – the M.S.A. Library met with instant recognition. Already "The Builders," which had made its way before the Association was born, in more than one language, has passed through three editions in its new form in the M.S.A. Library, to which it was contributed as a token of good will and a method of spreading Masonic Light. "The Men's House" is in its third edition in America, and its first in England.

The two brilliant books by Brother Haywood – "Symbolical Masonry" and "The Great Teachings of Masonry" – recovered from the files of "The Builder," where they would have been lost save to a few who turn over pages of old magazines – have won instant fame, and are soon to appear in English editions, The August issue of "The Square," the very able Masonic journal of New South Wales, contains an enthusiastic review of "The great Teachings of Masonry," which is only one of many such reviews from all over the Masonic world. No piece of original Masonic research in the history of American Masonic literature can surpass the work of Brother M.M. Johnson in "The Beginnings of Freemasonry in America," so ably reviewed in the July-August issue of "The Master Mason by Brother F.W. Hamilton. It is a thorough and competent feat of workmanship dealing with the most difficult period of Masonic history in this country, and it will remain a monument to its author and a credit to the Craft. No one can hereafter write of that period of our history without reference to it. It is a real book in form, style and content; of which we have a right to be proud as we are proud of our history and tradition. The work of Brother MacBride on "Speculative Masonry" speaks for itself, giving ripe, rich wisdom and learning of one of the greatest of modern Masonic teachers in a form both inviting and inspiring, which would otherwise have been lost to the American Craft.

A new and enlarged edition – enlarged by almost one-half – of the "Symbolism of the Three Degrees," by Brother Oliver Day Street of Alabama is now in the press. It is the best book in that field since Mackey, and will be a standard work for years to come, if only because it proceeds on the sound principal that Masonic Symbols should have a Masonic interpretation. He thereby saves himself time, and his readers the weariness of wandering through ancient

mazes in quest of the meaning of our symbols, which, if they are made to mean everything, do not mean anything at all. The book will be welcomed by the Craft everywhere as a real work of real Masonic worth.

Other books also in the press, including a Little Masonic Library of twenty volumes to be sold to the Craft at an extremely modest price within reach of everyone, covering almost every aspect of Masonry – its history, especially in modern times, its Constitution, its Landmarks, its Symbolism, its Poetry, its Patriotism, the part it played in the American Revolution, its various Rites, its Ethics, its Practical Meaning, its homely wisdom and brotherliness, its jurisprudence, its great men, its relation to the movements of our time – a Little Library which any young Mason can own and understand and enjoy, and which will form the foundation of further studies. Such things we can do when we work together – things which no Grand Lodge, however great, can do alone. If such things are not worth doing, we may as well admit that our talk about Masonic Education is just talk, and that Masonry either has nothing to teach – no history worth knowing, no symbolism worth studying – or that we do not know how to teach it. If the Association has done nothing else during the year, it would be entitled to the perpetual gratitude of the Fraternity. It means a new day in Masonic literature, a new standard both of accuracy and attractiveness, and, by the same token, a new appeal of the Craft to Craftsmen, as well as to the world in which Masonry has something to do, some us believe, which no other society can do.

Meantime, no jurisdiction has been invaded, no sovereignty impugned and no Landmark violated. It is simply a feat of cooperation. Everything cannot be done all at once, but something has been done – something memorable and significant – enough to show what can be done in behalf of the greatest Fraternity known upon earth and among men, if we are wise enough and patient enough to add a new point of fellowship – "Shoulder to Shoulder," in a spirit of mutual courtesy, cooperation and brotherly good will.

V

To this brief discussion of the Masonic Service Association, a word ought to be added about its Journal. Not many words are needed. "The Master Mason" speaks for itself and tells its own story. The editor has no word about his own work, except that it has been done honestly, and in a spirit of good will. It is worth what it is worth, no more, no less.

But we can say something about that which we have in mind, even if we have not attained it. No worker reaches his ideal. If he does, it is hardly worth the effort, since it is too low and too near by. Every true ideal has wings, and must be pursued. So it is with "The Master Mason; it is not what it ought to be, because we are always discovering how it can be made better. However, it must be plain enough what "The Master Mason" means to be and tries to be.

First, it is not, specifically, a journal of Masonic research. To have made it such would have been to duplicate work done with ability and distinction by other journals, especially "The Builder," in whose usefulness we have an abiding interest – for the sake of the past as well as the present. The field of Masonic research is wide and rich, but we have been less concerned with the past of Masonry than with its present; not where it came from but where it is going and what it is doing. Second, it is not a journal of Masonic news, least of all local and personal news, and therefore in no sense a rival of the many journals whose work it is to tell the doings of the Craft in the various jurisdictions and sections of the country. If it prints news at all it is of a striking sort of interest to whole Craft – some important event, some memorable service, some outstanding achievement in behalf of the common cause of Brotherhood. Third, we have tried to put into it something of the human side of Masonry – fiction dealing with Masonic duty, loyalty, service and adventure; stories of Brethren who have won fame in various fields of activity and art; glimpses of Masonry in other lands and the difficulties under which it labors; accounts of great lodges, such as the story of Roosevelt Lodge in the last issue – with more of like kind to follow; as well as studies of ritualism and symbolism, and discussions of the problems and opportunities of the Craft.

Fourth, it has always seemed to us that interest is the first element of education, and it has been our aim to awaken a new interest in the many-sided work and worth of Masonry. Our Craft is one of the most interesting institutions in the world. Once its members see how vast it is, how far-reaching over the earth, how varied are its aspects and undertakings they will have a new pride in its fellowship, a new zest in the study of its story, and will find in it a field of personal development and human service not dreamed of before.

Fifth, it is plain that Masonry has more to fear today from its misguided friends than from its malignant enemies. The temptation of ardent Brethren – good men and true – is to turn it aside from its tradition, using it as a weapon instead of a worship, and in other ways diverting it from its wise and benign course. In the midst of the swirling passions of the hour this temptation is very great, and we have stood against it and mean to do so without swerving in the future.

Sixth, the editor has been accused of preaching too much in "The Master Mason." He pleads guilty. It is an awful habit, and once the bug gets into the blood it is hard to get rid of it. Nor can we give much promise to reform. We are of those to whom the spiritual significance of Masonry is its soul, and the secret of its influence and charm. Once that is overlooked or left out, Masonry for us, loses its unique interest and appeal. So much for the spirit and ideal of "The Master Mason."

What its future is to be can be forecast when we know that it is to have a future, and that lies in the hands of the Association. We think it has justified its existence, and can be of incalculable aid to the Association, if it is accorded the cooperation it deserves. It has been enlarged, as recent issues revealed, and it can be greatly strengthened in many ways, making it the best

servant of the Masonic Service Association, alike in its inspiration and its information, as the work grows and expands.

With such a beginning, and with so much promise of power for good to the cause of Freemasonry, it would seem folly to falter, much less to turn back. There has never been such an opportunity in the history of the American Craft, and there is not likely to be another in our generation. If there are difficulties in the way, the alternative is still more difficult to face. What we need is a first-class exhibit of Masonic values, a practical application of the Gospel of Fraternity which we have been wont to preach so eloquently.

In the face of the challenge of the present situation, let us recall the famous story of Foch. A certain sector was hard pressed and the line was wavering. The officer in command sent a message to Foch saying that he could not hold the line, and asked what to do. Back came the answer, worthy of the man and his cause: "If you can't hold the line, ADVANCE!"

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