

The Mystic Tie

Unknown

Adieu! A heart-warm, fond adieu!
Dear Brothers of the Mystic Tie
Ye favored, ye enlightened few
Companions of my social joy!

The immortal verse of Robert Burns, written in his farewell to his brethren of St. James Lodge, Tarbolton, Scotland, first popularized, if it did not originate, the three words now universally recognized by all English speaking Freemasons as expressing the very essence of the Fraternity.

But to recognize is one thing; to define is quite another, as any man may discover who attempts to describe a perfume, a sunset, a symphony, so another may smell, see, hear with the speaker.

What IS the Mystic Tie? Is it an obligation, taken before an Altar? Is it a Covenant, entered into between a man and men, before God and his fellows? Is it a thing that one can hold in his hand and see with his eye? Is it a matter of that land of the inner life, in which a man thinks the thoughts he never tells and learns the truths he cannot teach?

To every man, even the most extrovert and obvious-minded, comes at times a spiritual experience. Tongue-tied in the grip of emotion, few phrase it. But it happens; and none who reads these lame words but will admit it to himself at least, no matter how vociferously he denies it aloud.

It comes in as many ways as are men to whom it comes. One man stands before a mighty mountain – his eyes follow its rocky fastness up, up, up to where austere saw teeth of stone cut into the blue. Something in the might, the majesty, the aloofness, the dignity, the timelessness of the mass passes from rock to heart and sings therein a harmony which never quite dies away. Another cultivates a rose garden and in the pure beauty of the blossom which bursts forth under his ministering hands sees a vision not of the earth, earthy. A third kneels in a cathedral and as the organ's deepest diapason sounds a note so low it is hardly heard, so profound nothing else can be heard, and a shaft of sunlight strikes through stained glass to pick out a bit of stone carving, feels himself close to the eternal verities ...

And others sit in a Lodge; a familiar, everyday, ordinary fact of brotherhood's experience. They hear familiar ritual; they see familiar faces; they engage in familiar actions. There is no element of surprise, or drama, or great event, yet there is something present which is found nowhere else; something that men come, and come, and come again, often all their lives through, to get . .

As illusive as a half-memory or childhood, as hard to catch as a sunbeam, as intangible as the hint of spring that sets the birds to flying north, it is as strong as steel, as permanent as the earth, as certain and dependable as gravity.

Brother Arthur F. Powell comes as near as may be to saying what is not sayable;

"What strand is it that tugs at our hearts. taut when so many threads are broken in the rough ways of the world?" he asks. then answers: "Ask what it is in the wild that calls to the little wild things? What sacred secret things do the mountains whisper to the hillmen, so silently yet so surely that they can be heard above the din and clatter of the world? What mystery does the sea tell to the sailor, the desert to the Arab, the arctic ice to the explorer, the stars to the astronomer? When we have answered these questions, mayhap we may divine the magic of Masonry. Who knows what it is or how or why unless it be the long Cabletow of God running from heart to heart?"

We learn in school that a whole is the sum of all its parts. If, then, we might list all the parts which compose the Mystic Tie, their sum should be the definition of the whole. But it is not. Firstly, we cannot "list all the parts," since one man's list and that of his brother would differ even as our brother's differ from ours. And secondly and finally, a whole which is the sum of all its parts is material – and the Mystic Tie is not made of matter.

We all have the same number of letters in the alphabet: we all have access to the dictionary which contains every word in the language – but we do not know how to take of these and write a Psalm of David, or Sermon on the Mount. We have the bricks and the stone and may even possess the plan – but the mortar of the spirit to build them into something deathless – that escapes us. Modern musicians have more notes to the scale than were known to Brahms and Beethoven and more strings and brass and woodwind to sound them – but who writes symphonies as the Masters wrote?

Still, we may try. Knowing in advance that we must fail.

Ritual is a part of the Mystic Tie. How or why man must make rituals and learn them, love them, preserve them, is as mysterious as anything in life – but it has always been so. There is something deep within us which demands a set form of expression: we may say the thought in a thousand ways but we do say it in unison and in a special way. And this is true whether it be Freemasonry or Church or everyday life which is filled with a ritual so common that we do not think of it as ritual. "Good morning! How are you?" – ritual. To smile on seeing a friendly face – ritual. The clasp of hand to hand; the familiar gathering of family about a table; school,

business, earning a living – all are rituals without which life would be unlivable. The lover's kiss and the words which all the world knows but which are invariably whispered as a secret – these, too, are ritual. And so the ritual of the Lodge, with its old, old truths phrased in stilted old-fashioned words and teaching anew every time it is heard what is already known of all who hear it – this golden chain of sounds which die even as they are born, and yet which never cease sounding once they have been taken into the heart – they are a part of the Mystic Tie.

Teaching and learning ritual is a part of it. Long ago, answering some question regarding the oral and the cipher method of teaching ritual, Dr. Joseph Fort Newton, beloved and inspired brother, wrote:

"What is efficiency in the teaching of Masonry? Surely it is something more than accuracy of the letter, valuable as that is. It is also the communication of a spirit, and we submit that this highest and most precious result is better achieved by oral instruction. It goes deeper, it stays longer, it touches parts of our nature which are not reached by decoding a cipher. For example, we were instructed in Masonry by a noble and gracious man to whom Masonry meant very much – long since gone to join the white and silent people we call the dead – but the impress of his spirit lingers still. He gave us something which no book can give, because the finest truth is communicated only through personality – it passes silently, mystically, from soul to soul. It is so in all education. The best thing a lad gets at college is not from books, but from his contact with strong men – as when Garfield said that the best university would be to sit on one end of a log with Horace Mann on the other end. Inaccuracies may be corrected, but we cannot think that the hours which we spent in fellowship with the gracious man who instructed us in the days that come not back, were wasted. Never! Perhaps we are sentimental. If so, we are glad of it. But we do feel that to abandon the oral teaching of Masonry would mean the loss of something unique, particular, and fine, and we know of nothing to take its place."

Friendship is a part of the mystic tie; that glory of life in which man finds a man in whom he can trust, for whom he would labor, with whom he would live. Not the greatest poet who has yet lived has been able to define friendship. We know what it is, but we cannot explain it. Yet it is there, alive, vital, a part of Lodge life, an integer in the whole, and so a part of the Mystic Tie.

Mystery is a part of it – indeed, is it not named for mystery? And Freemasonry is so filled with mysteries! From whence came it, this chain of fraternity which began we know not when and grew we know not how? And whither does it go? The one as much a mystery as the other. Why do men seek that which does not advertise, which is known so little, (and that little, so badly) by the outside world? What unknown millions of men once trod its halls? Their names, their lives, their acts, their influence – we know them not. True, we can sup with Ashmole and enter St. Peter's with Wren; we can kneel with Washington in a Lodge in Fredericksburg, and we can touch the hand of Lafayette in a Masonic procession – at least in reading and in imagination. But the millions of unknowns who stepped as we have stepped, who spoke as we have spoken, who pledged as we have pledged, who lived and loved and died in Freemasonry, as we live and

love and will die – they are a mystery; a dear, bewildering, unknown and forever to be unknown mystery but – a part of the Mystic Tie. The "secrets" of Freemasonry are a part of it. Granted that those secrets are of use and value only to the Freemason, the fact remains; men love that which is secret, that which sets them off from their fellows; that which the uninitiated cannot share. Passengers on a liner exclaim at the huge size of an iceberg, seldom realizing that there is eight times as much ice below the surface of the sea as is visible above. So with the power of the secrets of Freemasonry; the bond that lies within them is eighty times eight tighter than is tied by their mere possession.

Quoting again from the so-very-quotable Dr. Newton, writing in *The Builder*:

"In the Old Charges of Craft Masonry the initiate was obligated to keep the secrets of the Craft, by his honor as a man on the 'contents of this holy Book.' What were those secrets in the olden time? They included the technical secrets of his art – which have become symbolical secrets to us – and the Signs and tokens by which he made himself known as a Master Mason when he went a-journeying. Those secrets protected both the artist and his art. What are the secrets of a Master Mason now? Not the wise and noble truths which the order teaches. Our fundamental Principles are the common possession of thinking men and are the foundations of the higher human life everywhere. Now what is secret in Masonry is not the truth which it teaches. but the method by which it teaches it – its ceremonial and symbolism, and the signs and token by which it protects the privacy of its Lodge room that it may teach more impressively. Also, those signs and tokens serve as a cover under which charity, brotherliness, and the busy heart of love can work without ostentation – enabling us to serve a brother in perplexity or need without wounding a heart already sore. Therefore, if those secrets were surrendered, something beautiful and fine would be lost. In other days it required some courage to be a Mason, and those old pioneers who faced obloquy for their Masonic faith and fellowship, knew what they were about when they took no risks of having their sacred secrets violated but kept them warm and tender and true, passing them from mouth to ear down the years!" Of the Mystic Tie, too the universality of Freemasonry is a part. Two and a half million brothers in this nation – five million in the world. In every civilized Country Freemasonry has grown and thrived until, alas, the ideologies of Dictators who revere only force struck down the gentle Craft in conquered countries. To be a part of anything important is always a bond: to be a part of anything so universal so widespread, so essential to so many peoples in so many lands and times – surely this is a part of the Mystic Tie.

"My Mother Lodge!" Next to his family and his God many a man keeps thought of Mother Lodge closely and dearer in his heart than anything else the world may offer him. Its hall may be small and old. Its furniture may be shabby and decrepit. The pictures on the walls may be faded, the carpet worn, the physical side wholly drab. but the Mother Lodge itself is neither shabby nor drab, it shines with a gentle radiance in the hearts of brethren who love it and the light it sheds they will follow far. Surely it too, is a part of the Mystic Tie.

So on these pages might run on for volumes and still the story would not be told nor the arts listed show forth the truth of the whole.

None who have known it would think of denying the strength of the Mystic Tie. None who have its cord about their hearts would loose it. None can wholly comprehend it: none define, describe it. It exists; it works its gentle miracles: it is as mighty as it is intangible. Perhaps that singer of Freemasonry had a partial vision of it when he wrote "The Road":

So many men before thy Alter kneel
Unthinkingly, to promise brotherhood:
So few remain, humbly to kiss thy rood
With ears undefened to their mute appeal:
So many find thy symbols less than real.
Thy teachings mystic, hard to understand:
So few there are in all thy far flung band
To hold thy banner high and draw thy steel,
And yet – immortal and most mighty , thou!
What hath thy lore of life to let it live?
What is the vital spark, hid in thy vow?
Thy Millions learned, as thy dear paths
they trod.
The secret of the strength thou hast to give –
"I am a way of common men of God."

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