

THOUGHT
FOR
A
THOUGHTFUL
MASON

by

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If there be a brother of the Craft who, whilst being on easy terms with the Book of (not so) Common Prayer, is yet to read through what is rightly described as "The Preface" he will find much to interest him if he does so—particularly with reference to the opening paragraph of part Two, which begins with the astonishing statement that

"There was never anything by the wit of man so well devised, or so sure established, which in the continuance of time hath not been corrupted."

Although the author goes on to detail the alleged corruption (of the Services) which he has in mind—and which we here, have nothing whatever to do—nevertheless the use of the adverb "never" without any qualifying phrase, tends to render his contention a very wide one.

The Book of Common Prayer in general use in the C of E today, is the 1559* edition—which is a long, long time ago, and about one hundred and fifty years before the Craft became reliably documented: but since it remains to this day the legal service book of the Church, and the "Preface" remains there unaltered, there would appear ample grounds for accepting it as a general statement, and not merely specific.

Should the curious have a fancy to apply it to the Craft, an intriguing question could emerge. Not "*Is F/M corruptible*", but "*Has F/M ever been corrupted?*" which is a very different thing. In answer to the second part, all the evidence would seem to be heavily in favour of the Order.

So much of its history has been probed, discussed, written, sifted and digested, and by those well qualified to do so, that presumably, little remains unsaid of its development throughout the formative years from 1717 onwards. For myself, a fairly avid reader of masonic lore and history, I know of no major scandal, or for that matter minor scandal either, that has ever been recorded, and such is the acknowledged probity of those worthy brothers of our Order who seek to unravel for our edification and delight, the birth, rise and development of the Craft, had any event occurred, in any way dubious, it would certainly have seen the light of day. The pen was ever mightier than the sword.

Throughout its known history, it is abundantly clear the Craft in Britain has always eschewed not only political and factual connurbation of any kind, but also sets its face uncompromisingly against any group, sect or association with a known or acknowledged "slant". Coldly aloof from argument it stands revealed a model of tact and discretion: refuses to be "drawn", whilst never for one moment failing to set an irreproachable example to the fraternity, by steadfastly maintaining those stern moral tenets which at once constitute its strength and so largely justifies its existence. Vigilantly jealous of its impartiality, nothing tends to alert it more readily than a single implied threat, however vague or initially remote, which could conceivably constitute itself a menace to its good name or prove an unconscious source of a stain appearing upon the fine, fair shield of its escutcheon.

Whilst many and illuminating examples of the probity and highmindedness of our rulers, both supreme and subordinate, and no doubt of private individual as well, could certainly be cited, two should suffice for the purposes of this discourse. First, the M.W.G.M. was, some time subsequent to his elevation, discovered his religious observances transgressed to a point where it was difficult to reconcile it with Craft membership. He quietly resigned after only four years as G.M.*

A second case which comes to mind as an apt illustration of my point, concerns the villain* who, more than fifty years ago, upon being convicted of heartless and cruel murder, had the impudence and effrontery to make the judge a gesture every F/M will comprehend. It occurred immediately after the verdict and as the Clerk of the Court had put the traditional question (as he was legally obliged to do): "Have you anything to say why sentence should not be passed". There was an awful pause before the astonished judge, visibly affected, and speaking with rare emotion, proceeded coldly to admonish the wretched man, by sternly reminding him of the high moral obligation the Order "to which you and I belong" placed upon its members. Assuming the black cap (then in vogue) he then passed sentence of death—in those days inevitable—and the only one prescribed for a capital crime. It is said the incident so remained in the judge's mind that it is generally understood he would never again preside at a murder trial.

Always, musing of this kind seem somehow to provoke those awkward questions so often posed by initiated and

laymen alike; "What does it all add up to?" "What part does F/My *really* play in the scheme of the Universe?" "Wherein lies the secret of its fascination and, above all, the wizardry of the spell it appears to cast so readily and so widely, over rich and poor alike?"

They are queries legitimate enough in themselves, but to which I, for one, confess I can find no real answer; only thoughts; and for what those thoughts are worth, I here set them down.

Once in every year, every Lodge Secretary is under a mandate to read aloud certain extracts from the Book of Constitutions (first published by Anderson in 1727). Some Lodges read an extract at every meeting, and a good idea it is too, because these "Ancient Charges", as they are called, cover in no small detail every aspect of an (ideal!) F/M's approach to life, as well as setting out very clearly indeed, his responsibilities as a member of the Order.

By and large F/My sets a pattern of life for us all. It is not an easy pattern to follow; not easy to maintain; and perhaps, in some cases, in a modern world, it could be argued as one impossibly high. And there we would be wrong, for the simple reason that duty is unchanging and duty never lapses. The true merit of duty lies not so much in the literal fulfilment of the lofty enactments it impresses upon man, as in the efforts man makes to recognise and accept its liability, at all times, and in all seasons.

Right across the length and breadth of the world F/Ms' Lodges have been erected, within whose quiet portals an incredible number of the initiated daily ply their craft. Let but a modest portion do so, dedicated, and with that high moral obligation the Craft imposes ever in mind, and I should find it distressful to conclude F/My has nothing to contribute to the world.

Better to believe in faith, that, far from being ephemeral, it does today—as it always has done—howbeit unsung and unheralded as it well may be, nevertheless, hourly lays in the lap of the world a rare and precious gift, all mortal power excelling.

* Slightly revised in 1662.

* 1st Marquess of Ripon. 1870-74 and succeeded by H.R.H. Prince of Wales—afterwards King Edward VII.

* F. H. Seddon.