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MEMORANDUM ON "MASONIC FUNERALS."

1. This subject has come into prominence again at the instance of W. Bro. Rev. A. B. Carver, who is on the duty roster at Golder's Green Cemetery and who reports instances where members of the Craft have virtually usurped the position of the mourners, and have made Masonic signs and allusions that are inappropriate, in his opinion, to a public place.

Such criticism is, unfortunately, nothing new, and it was with a view to checking the behaviour of Masons at funerals that a note was inserted in the Masonic Year Book in 1953 and has been republished annually ever since; it reads as follows:-

"Masonic Funerals. It has been brought to the notice of the Board that there have been recent instances in which some of our Brethren have intervened at the funeral of a Brother in a manner likely to cause distress to relatives and other mourners, as well as to those attending the burial service, many of whom are not Masons.

The Board strongly condemns such conduct, and emphasizes that there should be no Masonic participation in any funeral service except the inclusion of Masonic prayers at the request of the nearest relatives, and with the approval of the officiating Clergyman or Minister; that Masonry is not a religion and acknowledges no Masonic Service as a substitute for, or addition to, a religious funeral service."

2. There is, however, a deepseated belief, particularly abroad, that a Masonic funeral service exists. enquiry into the early history of the matter reveals that:-

i. our early Brethren were not allowed to appear at a funeral in Masonic clothing without dispensation. (This does not of itself imply that they were going to take any active part in the funeral).

ii. for many years before 1834 there was a section in the Book of Constitutions "of Masonic Funerals" which read as follows:-

"No Mason can be interred with the formalities of the Order, unless it be at his own special request, nor unless he has been advanced to the degree of a Master Mason. When the wish of the deceased shall have been communicated to the Master of the Lodge of which he dies a member, the Master may apply to the Grand Master or Provincial Grand Master for a dispensation.

"A dispensation having been obtained, the Master may invite other Lodges to attend in form, but the whole ceremony, unless the Grand Master or his deputy be present, must be under the direction of the Master of the Lodge to which the deceased belonged; and he is accountable for the regularity and conduct of the whole proceedings.

"The Lodges rank according to seniority, the junior preceding (except the Lodge to which the deceased belonged, which in every case is to go the last), and each Lodge forms one division."

This was not, strictly speaking, among the rules but took its place with sections on Constituting a new Lodge and Conducting public ceremonies; there is, however, a reference earlier on - "No Masonic funeral or other public procession shall on any pretence be allowed without the license of the Grand Master or provincial Grand Master", and offenders are debarred from ever being officers of a Lodge or benefit from the general Charity.

iii. all reference to the subject was dropped in the revised edition of 1884, but the matter was kept alive in Lewis's publication

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of the Lectures which prints what purports to be a "Masonic Ritual to be used at the interment of a deceased Brother, with the addresses, etc. (To follow the usual funeral service of the religious denomination to which the deceased Brother belonged)." (This is given in full as an Appendix.)

3. It would appear from the above -

i. that even while it was provided for by the Book of Constitutions, no Masonic funeral service could take place without dispensation.

ii. that it ceased to be provided for at all in 1884.

iii. that it purported to be something that took place after the religious service was over, thus duplicating the services of the accredited Minister of Religion.

On the other hand there is much in the second part of the service which might reasonably suggest that the Master is taking the place of a Minister, and that it is the deceased's Brethren who are actually burying him and not merely mourning for him.

4. The following questions may well be asked at this stage:-

i. Is a Masonic funeral service desirable? A funeral in almost all cases is a religious ceremony and as Masonry is not a religion or an alternative to any religious denomination it seems to be inappropriate to attach a Masonic element to a religious service. It seems reasonable to suppose that those who ask for a Masonic funeral ask for it in ignorance of the true relationship of Masonry and Religion or because they have heard of it happening in other cases; in the case of relatives, the idea may well be put into their minds by Lodge members condolences and help, by the undertakers or the Clergy.

ii. Is a Masonic funeral service necessary? It is suggested that hardly anywhere nowadays will there be a community large enough to support a Lodge but too small to have a minister of religion available; hence it would seem that a Masonic service in default of a religious service is unlikely to be needed. If it is argued that some Brethren might prefer to be buried by their fellow Masons and have no religious participation, we are brought back to the old and dangerous belief that Masonry is a religion or substitute for a religion.

iii. In general, looked at from the point of view of the survivors, is it in accordance with Masonic principles that they should seek to take part in the funeral service as Masons rather than as friends and mourners, thus advertising to the congregation the fact that they are Masons?

From the point of view of the family, is it right that the Masonic friends of the deceased should add to the religious service an element in which the family mourners, the most interested party, can take no part as such?

Cannot the officiating clergy reasonably feel affronted that their ministrations in the case of a deceased Freemason should be considered inadequate, and that a further ceremony should take place after their interment prayer and blessing?

5. It is submitted for the consideration of the Board that -

i. wider circulation should be given to the paragraph in the Masonic Year Book, i.e. by its inclusion in the Board's Report to Grand Lodge, and that some steps should be taken to ensure that this information permeates through to those professionally responsible for the conduct of funeral ceremonies.

ii. the Board should indicate to those responsible for issuing dispensations its view that the wearing of Masonic clothing at funerals is totally improper.

iii. the Board should indicate to the Craft generally that publications purporting to contain a Masonic funeral service have no standing or authority, and that the service itself is considered to be undesirable when used as an adjunct or appendage to the usual religious rites.

iv. the Board should intimate to the publishers, where possible, its hope that the so-called Masonic funeral service will be dropped from future editions.

It might be thought that consideration should be given at the same time to the provision of positive help in cases where a request has been made by or approved by the relatives that "Masonic" prayers be included, and that something could be added in paragraph 2 of page 936, Masonic Year Book for 1961, to the effect that a selection of prayers and/or passages of Scripture which the Board considers to be unexceptionable and appropriate for such an occasion, but to which it does not purport to give any official sanction, can be obtained from the Grand Secretary's Office.

On balance it is probable that more harm than good would result and that any such selections would come to be regarded as an official list, however clearly it was labelled to the contrary: the result would thus be that Grand Lodge would be liable to the allegation, however ill-founded, that it was giving countenance to Masonic Funerals.

Appendix.

"The Worshipful Master reads as follows:

"Brethren. - The melancholy event which has caused us to assemble on the present occasion cannot have failed to impress itself on the mind of everyone present. The loss of a friend and brother - especially of one whose loss we now deplore - conveys a powerful appeal to our hearts, reminding us of the uncertainty of life, and of the vanity of earthly hopes and designs.

"Amid the pleasures, the cares, and the various avocations of life we are too apt to forget that upon us also the common lot of mankind must one day fall, and that Death's dread summons may surprise us even in the very meridian of our lives, and in the full springtide of enjoyment and success.

"The ceremonial observances which we practise during the obsequies of a departed Brother are intended to remind us of 'our own inevitable destiny', and to warn us that we also should be likewise ready, for we know not the day nor the hour when in the case of each of us 'the dust shall return to the earth as it was, and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.'

"Then, Brethren, let us lay these things seriously to heart; let us strive in all things to act up to our Masonic profession, to live in accordance with the high moral precepts inculcated in our Ceremonies and to practically illustrate in our lives and actions the ancient tenets and established customs of the Order. Thus, in humble dependence upon the mercy of the Most High, we may hope, when this transitory life with all its cares and sorrows shall have passed away, to rejoin this our departed friend and Brother in the Grand Lodge above, where the world's Great Architect lives and reigns supreme.

"Chant (omnes) - so mote it be.

"(The following supplications are then offered by the Master:)

"MASTER. - May we be true and faithful, and may we live in fraternal affection one towards another, and die in peace with all mankind.

"RESPONSE (to be sung). - So mote it be.

"MASTER. - May we practise that which is wise and good, and always act in accordance with our Masonic profession.

"RESPONSE (to be sung). - So mote it be.

"MASTER. - May the Great Architect of the Universe bless us, and direct us in all that we undertake and do in His Holy Name.

"RESPONSE (to be sung). - So mote it be.

"(The Secretary then advances and throws his roll into the grave, while the Master repeats, in an audible voice:)

"MASTER.- Glory be to God on high! on earth peace! Goodwill towards men!

"RESPONSE. (to be sung) - So mote it be, now, henceforth, and for evermore!

"There is a calm for those who weep,  
A rest for weary pilgrims found;  
They softly lie and sweetly sleep,  
Low in the ground; low in the ground!

"The storm that wracks the winter sky  
No more disturbs their deep repose,  
Than summer evening's latest sigh,  
That shuts the rose! that shuts the rose!

"Ah, wanderer! long of storms the sport,  
Condemn'd in wretchedness to roam,  
Hope thou shalt reach a sheltering port,  
A quiet home! a quiet home!

"The sun is like a spark of fire,  
A transient meteor in the sky;  
The soul, immortal as its sire,  
Shall never die! shall never die!

(The Master then concludes the ceremony at the grave in the following words:)

"MASTER. - From time immemorial it has been the custom among the Fraternity of Free and accepted Masons, at the request of a Brother on his death-bed, to accompany his corpse to the place of interment; and there to deposit his remains with the usual formalities of the Order. In conformity with this usage, and at the special request of our deceased Brother, whose loss we deeply deplore, we are here assembled as Freemasons, to consign his body to earth, and, openly before the world, to offer up in his memory the last tribute of our fraternal affection, thereby demonstrating the sincerity of our esteem for our deceased Brother, and our inviolable attachment to the principles of the Order.

"The Great Creator having been pleased, in His infinite wisdom, to remove our worthy Brother from the cares and troubles of this transitory life, and thereby to weaken the ties by which we are united to the world, may we who survive him, anticipating our own approaching end, be more strongly cemented in the bonds of union and friendship, and, during the short space which is allotted to us in our present existences, may we wisely and usefully employ our time in the interchange of kind and fraternal acts, and may we strive earnestly to promote the welfare and happiness of our fellow men.

"Unto the grave we have consigned the body of our deceased friend and Brother, there to remain until the general resurrection, in the fullest confidence that both body and soul will then arise to partake of the joys which have been prepared for the righteous from the beginning of the world. And may Almighty God, of His infinite goodness, at that last grand tribunal, extend His mercy towards him, and all of us, and crown our hope with everlasting bliss, in the realms of a boundless eternity! This we beg, for the honour of His name, to whom be glory, now and forever.

CHANT (omnes) - So mote it be.

"It is decreed in heaven above,  
That we from those whom best we love,  
Must sever.

"But hard the word would be to tell  
If to our friends we said farewell  
For ever.

"And thus the meaning we explain -  
We hope, and be our hope not vain,

"That, though we part, we meet again.  
A brief farewell, then meet again  
For ever."

END OF THE FUNERAL CEREMONY."