

Chapter 3

Masonic Babbitry

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Ape the service clubs. Get busy on "projects" galore in the best Babbitt fashion.

A LITTLE more than forty years ago Sinclair Lewis published a novel, and immediately a noun was added to the American language. That noun was the title of the book: *Babbitt*. From that day forth the word Babbitt came to mean a person of the type depicted by George F. Babbitt, real estate dealer, who lived in a Dutch Colonial house in exclusive Floral Heights, in the city of Zenith—fastest growing little burg in the Midwest, by golly.

George F. Babbitt had the "right connections." Professionally, spiritually, fraternally and politically, his Status Symbols were most impressive. He believed fervently in restricted immigration to "keep those blasted foreigners out;" he had no racial prejudice, of course, but insisted that the Negro "stay in his place;" he was certain the labor unions were inspired and controlled by alien influences, and he viewed with alarm the teachings of the "pinks" at the State University.

But of all his orthodox affiliations, he found the weekly luncheon group known as the Boosters' Club the most satisfying, and to it he paid homage. Local chapter of a national organization, its grand aim was the promotion of Sound Business and Friendliness among Regular Fellows.

FOR FOUR DECADES, Americans have chuckled over the superficialities of George Babbitt, squirmed as they saw themselves in the mirror . . . and faithfully followed in his footsteps. Babbitry has found its way into every area of American life, excepting none—and including Freemasonry. The great aim set forth in Freemasonry's Declaration of Principles is a lofty one indeed:

"Through the improvement and strengthening of the character of the *individual man*, Freemasonry seeks to improve the community ..."

But that is not enough for a restless, itchy, pragmatic America. It is not enough to endeavor to bring men to Light, nor to satisfy intellectual hunger, nor to minister to the inner needs of a confused people, nor to provide a moral bulwark for everyday struggles, nor to give men a foundation upon which to build a righteous life.

No, we must worship at the altar of Service to Our Fellow Men. Our organizations must "do things"—that is, things which may be *seen*, and *heard*, and *felt*; things which may be measured by dollars, and buildings, boards of directors, and letterheads, and intense "busyness." There must be some tangible endeavor, some material object to which we can point to "justify our existence." We must be able to show by local projects, by fund-raising activities, by annual contributions to a horde of organized charities, by some

movement to eradicate one of the physical ills of the human race that we are indeed boosters, and Solid Citizens, and Civic Leaders Devoted to the Advancement of the Community.

NOW, at the very outset let me make one point perfectly clear: the Grand Secretary of Indiana is not attacking the service clubs. I shall repeat that statement before I am through. In 30 years I have been affiliated with two such clubs; I am a past president of one; I have nothing but admiration for them. In their field they are making a magnificent contribution to our American life. Their purpose is to engage in community service, and they are doing it admirably.

But that does not mean that Freemasonry should try to imitate them. It is the copycat school of thought within our Fraternity that I oppose. Masonic Babbitry is not Masonry, and I must part company with those who advocate it. By tradition, practice and temperament the clubs are not equipped to do the work of Freemasonry—and Masonry is not equipped to do the work of the clubs.

Anyone who knows anything at all about Freemasonry would suppose that our Craft would be the last place into which such philosophies and practices would penetrate. But herein lies the trouble: *Over the last several decades we have conferred the degrees upon far too many men who could not comprehend the message of Freemasonry.* Knowing little or nothing about the Fraternity, they have made no endeavor to find out. The weekly luncheon club was something they could comprehend; it required no effort on their part other than to meet, eat and pay; consequently, the service club idea and technique has left its mark upon our Craft. We may as well face it.

AND IF YOU THINK I am exaggerating (there are those who feel I do), then I invite your attention to just a few items gleaned from here and there:

—A Lodge in one large American Jurisdiction asked the Grand Master for permission to offer a \$10 prize to the member having the *"most perfect attendance"* (whatever that is) during the year.

—A Grand Lodge in the United States created a study committee and asked it to give consideration to "some worthwhile service project" that could be adopted.

—In one Canadian Jurisdiction the Grand Master was appalled at the use in Lodge meetings of large saucer-type identification badges, each bearing the *nickname* of the Master Mason wearer. They are, of course, patterned after the badges used at service club luncheons.

—In another Jurisdiction an "Achievement Trophy" is awarded annually on the same kind of point system used by service clubs in their district competitions. Points are granted on the basis of degrees conferred, affiliations, reinstatements, *net gain in membership* (yes, that's correct), educational meetings, average attendance at district meetings, and so on.

—Several years ago I had a friendly debate with a distinguished leader of another

Jurisdiction on whether or not a Master Mason should be penalized for failure to attend meetings of his Lodge. (My friend thought fines should be assessed; that has a familiar sound!)

—The Grand Master of an American Jurisdiction in his address to his Grand Lodge inserted a long and wearisome recital of what he termed "Visitations of the Grand Master." Believe it or not, the list included meetings of Rotary, Kiwanis and Lions Clubs, an organization of policemen, several PTA groups, numerous church and Sunday School societies, a social unit of an industrial organization, and chapel exercises at one of the State penal institutions !

I COULD CITE MANY, many more examples, for the Proceedings of our American Grand Lodges reveal all too clearly the trend towards less and less Freemasonry and more and more Babbitry.

Only rarely does a leader of any stature raise his voice to remind us that Masonic Lodges have their own particular job in the scheme of things; that they should do that job and nothing more. One of the most scholarly discussions on the subject was an article entitled, "Freemasonry is Not a Service Club," by Laurence Healey, Past Grand Master of Masons in British Columbia, published in *The Indiana Freemason* in March, 1951. It should be required reading for every Master Mason.

NOR IS MASONIC BABBITRY confined to areas outside Indiana. My readers already know what I think of speakers who accept an invitation to address a Masonic gathering and then proceed to talk about everything under the sun except Freemasonry. One time at a great occasion in an Indiana Lodge I heard a speaker upon whom our Fraternity has bestowed some of its choice honors actually *belittle* the conferring of the degrees of Ancient Craft Freemasonry. He said to the members of that Lodge, in effect, that if they were going to do no more than to "confer a few degrees," they would be parasites in the community. On the contrary, he said, they should be contributing to this movement and subsidizing that group, working at a project here and doing a good deed there. He told them service is the rent we pay for the space we occupy. It was an excellent Kiwanis speech.

Well, of course, I seethed as I listened, and said to myself, "There is Exhibit A—just another example of the point I have insisted upon: that we have too many Masons who are hazy as to what Masonry is all about. Instead of familiarizing themselves with Freemasonry, they think the Fraternity should be made over to fit the pattern of the lunch-
eon club with which they *are* familiar."

SHOULD THE TREND towards Masonic Babbitry continue at its present rate, we might as well prepare to close up shop. For when we set out to imitate the service clubs, we have abandoned Freemasonry in the first place, and we shall do a sorry job of imitation in the second place. Their entire province is that of community projects. They are doing their work and doing it well. As Freemasons, our work is cut out for us; the way we do it is peculiarly our own. To discard one banner and attempt to hoist another would only mean our absorption; our Craft would become just another club.

Why, in Heaven's name, do we overlook the fact that there is one thing, and one thing only, that our Craft can give a worthy man that no other organization on the face of the earth can give him? *That one thing is Freemasonry.*

When we stick to our knitting the field is our own; we have no competition whatever. We can contribute something to society, something to humanity, something to the community in which we live that all the service clubs combined cannot touch. Why, then, should Master Masons become busybodies in areas where we do not belong?

My Brethren, *we had better think it through.* We had better reflect on the sobering fact that much of the appeal of Freemasonry lies in its unique character; in short, that it *does not* operate like other organizations.

SURELY NO MAN who loves Freemasonry could welcome the thought of a Senior Tail-Twister and a Junior Tail-Twister in the line of Lodge officers. Or a plaque in the hotel lobby announcing that the Masons meet and eat on Mondays, 12:30 p.m. Or the raucous laughter and ribald stories of a weekly luncheon of Master Masons. Or good old Bill (ladies' ready-to-wear) with his saucer badge and white apron—maybe aprons could be discarded altogether. Or attendance contests. Or the annual Lodge dinner in honor of the basketball team. Or the summer excursion when Masons' grandsons and their friends' grandsons are taken to see a big league ball game. Or members of a Lodge committee running about like fussy old ladies to persuade the business houses to display the Stars and Stripes on Flag Day!

And when we come to the point that a Master Mason who misses a stated meeting of his Lodge has to travel to the neighboring county seat to make up his absence—that will be the day!

Do I see someone all bristled, insisting that I am poking fun at the service clubs? If so, let my outraged Brother relax. The service clubs, blessings on 'em, are acquitting themselves nobly. It is just that I love our ancient Craft too much to want to see practices and philosophies introduced into it which would make a travesty of Freemasonry; I do not want to see our Fraternity embrace ways and methods other than our own. / *hope the Great Architect spares me the anguish of seeing our beloved Craft watered down to the point that Master Masons become no more than Rotarians wearing aprons!*

THEN WHAT is our job if it is not Service to Our Fellow Men?

Is it a Master Mason who raises the question? Doubtless it is. I recall the time I received a letter typewritten on an impressive looking letterhead asking my opinion as to the purpose of Freemasonry. The writer was a Past Master of his Lodge, he said, and he makes speeches on Freemasonry. He went on to acquaint me with the wisdom that no organization can exist without a purpose.

Well, it isn't often that I ignore a letter, but I had to pass on that one. I was not interested in a Gallup Poll on such a subject. And what could I tell a Past Master who so obviously had no clear idea what Freemasonry is all about? He missed his first opportunity years and years ago, and never yet has he sought for That Which Was Lost.

Long before the clubs were ever dreamed of, Freemasonry was rendering Service to Our Fellow Men in a multitude of ways, without fanfare and without bustling "busyness." Service, benevolence, charity, loyalty to country and flag, responsible citizenship, community betterment—these are the *fruits* of its teachings, rather than the reason for its existence.

Then what do Freemasons contribute to humanity, to the improvement of country and community, to serving the needs of our fellow men? What is our purpose?

The answer, my Brother, is one you might discover for yourself with profit both to yourself and the Fraternity. Try finding out what Freemasonry *is* and what it *is not*, and leave off chafing over what you think it *should be*. Seek, and ye shall find; knock, and the door shall be opened unto you!