

Whither Are We Traveling?

Chapter Four – Pearl of Great Price?

By

Dwight L. Smith, P.G.M.

Grand Lodge of Indiana



Pearl of Great Price?

Question 3: Has Freemasonry become too easy to obtain?

Some three months ago when this series of articles was introduced, I took advantage of a fifty-year presentation occasion to write a Masonic editorial. The recipient of the Award of Gold had petitioned a Southern Indiana Lodge in 1911 when he was making \$10 a week as an apprentice printer. The fee for the degrees was \$20. He thought enough of Freemasonry to empty his pay envelope twice.

A century ago it was not uncommon for men to pay what amounted to a month's wages to become a Mason. We know without challenge that today petitioners are paying a fee which represents a week's wages at the most – sometimes only two or three days!

When we compare the nominal dues paid to a Lodge of Freemasons with those paid to a service club, a labor union, a trade or professional organization or a country club, we begin to get a faint idea of the source of some of our troubles.

And when we compare the ridiculously low fees paid to an Ancient Craft Lodge with the aggregate fees paid to other Masonic bodies and appendant groups, we begin to see clearly what is wrong. Men are willing to pay for the privilege of Freemasonry, but we distribute the fee they should be paying to an Ancient Craft Lodge among all the relatives, the in-laws and the step-children. We place such a cheap value on the basic degrees that it is no wonder newly raised Masons end up having little or no respect for the Symbolic Lodge.

Before we are in a position to tackle some of the difficulties that beset us, we must re-establish the premise that Freemasonry is a Pearl of Great Price, worth a great deal of effort, a great deal of sacrifice, a great deal of waiting to obtain. We need to do a little preaching, perhaps, with a certain New Testament passage as the text: "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."

Has Freemasonry become too easy to obtain? I am one who believes that it has. And I am not the only one. My old friend Arthur H. Strickland, of Kansas, recently wrote a thoughtful article for *The Philaethes*, entitled, "Who Killed Cock Robin?" Calling attention to the old axiom that what is easy to get is not much appreciated, he observes that "we have done everything that we can think of to cheapen Masonry ... We have cheapened the Fraternity to the point that it is seriously reacting against us."

Has Freemasonry become too easy to obtain? To me, the question is not even debatable. For example:

1. **Our fees for the degrees are so low as to constitute an insult to the Fraternity.** When I petitioned for the degrees in 1933 the fee was \$20. That was a good-sized chunk of anybody's money in 1933, but I would have paid three times that amount. Our economic standards of today can hardly be compared to 1933, yet

the minimum fee in Indiana is still only \$30 – and one Lodge in five charges the absolute minimum. There is not a Lodge in Indiana whose fee should not be at least twice its present amount.

For a long time I have had the uneasy suspicion that the period of accent on quantity rather than quality may have started during those cut-rate years of 1933 to 1944 when the minimum fee was only \$20.

2. **Everything is geared to speed, as if a deadline had to be met.** Freemasonry is no longer worth waiting for, nor working for, nor sacrificing for. Too often it is only a badge of respectability, a prestige symbol, to be obtained with the same hurry-up zeal that would be assumed in acquiring a Cadillac or a yacht. Candidate A must be rushed through the degrees before he leaves for service in the armed forces (he has heard it might be helpful to him.) Candidate B must be rushed through because he is about to move to a distant point to take a new job. Candidate C must hurry through so he can join a class in some other organization.

Proficiency? Nonsense! A friendly coach can take care of that. Comprehension of the underlying philosophy of Freemasonry, its symbolism and ethics and traditions, what it is and what it seeks to do? You know the answer to that question as well as I.

And we not only permit such a situation – we actually encourage it. How, in Heaven's name, can we so cheapen Ancient Craft Freemasonry and expect anything other than contempt for the parent body?

3. **The privilege of courtesy work has been so abused that it actually has become a detriment to all Freemasonry.** What was once intended as an occasional pleasant arrangement for the benefit of a Lodge has been liberalized to the point that it now is only for the convenience of a candidate. Do you realize that a candidate for the three degrees may become a Master Mason without ever having attended a single meeting of the Lodge which has elected him? He can be initiated in one Jurisdiction, passed in another, raised in another. And yet we expect him to become a loyal and devoted Mason, with a strong sentimental attachment to a Lodge he knows nothing about, and which has done nothing except to elect him! We crave his faithful attendance, but we do about everything in our power to create a situation in which loyalty has no place.

The incident in Montana in which a Brother received his fifty-year button without ever having attended a meeting of his own Lodge is not as far-fetched as we would like to think.

We can learn a great deal from our Mother Grand Lodge of England and from the Jurisdictions of Scotland and Ireland, Australia and Canada, where a candidate must receive the Entered Apprentice degree in the Lodge that elected him, and in

no other. It was a sad day for Masonry in Indiana when that regulation was repealed.

4. **One of the worst offenders in the cheapening process is the well-meaning father who is too eager for his son to become a Mason.** Those are hard words, but I have seen the story repeated over and over again. Sonny must be pushed through because Pop wants him to join the class in another body; because Pop wants him to receive the degrees in Germany, or France, or South America. Sonny may not have even lived within the Jurisdiction of the Lodge for years and years, but Pop wants him to join if the Lodge has to violate all the rules in the book to accomplish it.

So Pop comes to the Grand Lodge office with a plea that the residence laws be set aside; that the period of investigation be waived; that Sonny be advanced without regard to proficiency. You have known him; so have I. His name is legion.

What a contrast to the spirit of that great and good Past Master of an Indianapolis Lodge who waited years upon years to hear his son express the desire to become a Mason – and who, even then, did not offer to pay the son's initiation fee because he wanted the boy to appreciate what he was getting!

And then there are the ill-advised church parishioners who pay the fee for their minister. I have met quite a number of those ministers in my day, and have become rather cynical after working long hours trying to unravel their record of suspensions for NPD. But I must not get started on that subject.

When we downgrade Ancient Craft Masonry, submit it to all sorts of indignities, look upon it with contempt, label it as something hardly worth mentioning, permit it to have only the crumbs that fall from the table, what can we expect if Master Masons no longer give to their Lodges their full measure of loyalty and devotion?