

Masonic Convivialities

by
John Thorp

Some years ago, Bro. J.J.W. Knowles, a Past Master of the Lodge of Research, in a Paper read before the Members, dealt in some measure with the subject of Lodge refreshments, tracing the custom back to the time of the mediaeval Gilds. It is my desire to deal with the later phases of the same subject, more especially in connection with the Grand Lodge of England, and with the Lodges under its jurisdiction and authority.

The custom among the various Trade Gilds of celebrating with a Feast their Annual Meetings, seems to have been widespread and continuous. Toulmin-Smith refers to the custom thus (English Gilds, Intro, p. xxxiii) One day at least in the year, usually the day of the Saint to which the Gild, if it had a Saint s name, was dedicated, was more especially devoted than the others to festivities;... it was then that the brethren and sistren being all assembled, gave their alms, and feasted together, for the nourishing of brotherly love.

Indeed one authority traces the feast further back still, even to the Druids who were the only Priests among the ancient Britons. In their Solemnities they were Clothed in White; and their Ceremonies always ended with a good Feast. (A Defence of Masonry in Book of Constitutions, 1738 edit., p.221)

Whether the Brotherhood of Masons originated with the old Druids as some have affirmed, or sprang from the mediaeval Gilds, which is much more probable, is a question that I cannot now stay to consider, but the fact remains, that the earliest records of the existence of masons as a SPECULATIVE Society, refer to the custom of feasting at their meetings.

Thus Dr. Plot in writing of the Masons of his day (1686), says when any are admitted, they call a meeting (or Lodg as they term it in some places)... and entertain with a collation according to the Custom of the place: This ended, they proceed to the admission of them (The Natural History of Staffordshire, p.316)

In Ashmole s Diary also there occurs the following passage, in the account of a Lodge Meeting he attended in London in 1682 We all dined a the Half-Moon Tavem in Cheapside, at a noble Dinner prepared at the Charge of the new accepted Masons.

We are justified in assuming, therefore, that from very early times a Feast formed a part, in some cases no doubt a very important part, of the proceeding at the periodical Assemblies of the Masons.

Of what refreshments consisted in these early times, we have now very little means of judging. The fare varied probably, according to the position and wealth of the members, from the noble dinner of Ashmole, to the humble bread and cheese supper, followed in one case by port wine and rum-punch, and in the other by ale, brandy, and pipes.

It is quite probable that the custom originally arose in a veritable necessity, for doubtless many members of the early Lodges came considerable distances, on horse-back or on foot, to attend the meetings, and it was an absolute necessity that they should be provided with some refreshment on their arrival and before setting out on their return journey. The Junior Warden's call-off then was of practical value and significance, and not as in later times very frequently a mere symbolic allusion.

In Plot's time the Brethren seem to have partaken of their refreshment before they entered upon their work, and not as in our day after the work was over, and curiously enough, this practice was continued in the early days of the Grand Lodge of England. Thus we read:

Assembly and Feast at the said Place 24 June 1718. Brother Sayer having gathered the Votes, after Dinner proclaimed aloud our Brother George Payne Esq., Grand Master of Masons. And again Assembly and Feast at Stationers-Hall, 24 June 1721... After Grace said, they sat down in ancient Manner of Masons to a very elegant Feast, and dined with Joy and Gladness. After Dinner and Grace said, the Grand Master, Deputy Grand Master and other officers were invested, an Oration was delivered, and the Grand Master when all business was finished, ordered the Warden to close the Lodge in good time.

Indeed the following, which is included in the Charges of a Freemason, in the first (1823) Book of Constitutions, is a clear indication that the practice of partaking of a common meal was firmly established thus early in the eighteenth century:-- You may enjoy yourselves with innocent Mirth, treating one another according to Ability, but avoiding all Excess, or forcing any Brother to eat or drink beyond his Inclination, or hindering him from going when his Occasions call him.

The custom of eating and drinking in connection with Masonic Meetings seems to have continued without intermission, and the Annual Feast has remained a permanent feature of Grand Lodge proceedings, right down to the present time. Much money was occasionally devoted to the preparation of the Feast, for we read of a very elegant Feast, an elegant and sumptuous Feast, and on one occasion of a Grand Feast indeed. Sometimes, however, the Brethren seem to have feasted too sumptuously, for on November 25th, 1723, it was resolved, that special care be taken to prevent Disturbance and preserve Harmony on Feast-Days. In more recent times, the arrangements for the Grand Lodge Feast, have been carried out more or less satisfactorily, by a Board of Grand Stewards, annually appointed by the Grand Master, on the recommendation of the Red Apron Lodges.

This being the custom with the Grand Lodge of England, what more natural than that the Daughter Lodges, in their turn, should provide entertainment for their members? The history of every old Lodge testifies to the universality of the practice. Indeed in some cases eating, drinking, and even smoking were indulged in during the work of the Lodge. Long tables were set out in the Lodge-rooms, at which the Brethren seated themselves, and after the edibles had been consumed, toast, sentiment, and song alternated with masonic work.

It is then very clear, that from earliest times the Masonic Fraternity has been a Social Brotherhood. Much of the time spent in association has been occupied in cultivating the social virtues, in forming and cementing friendships, and in promoting good fellowship, all very laudable objects. The very fact that most of the early Lodges indeed many at the present time - met or now meet at Taverns, Hotels, and Inns, afforded every opportunity to the Brethren for this form of enjoyment, or even offered inducements thereto. From the history and bye-laws of many old Lodges it is easy to see, how large a place the pleasures of the table occupied in the Freemasonry of the past, and how much of the contributions of the Brethren towards the funds of the Lodge, was spent in refreshment for the good of the house. It was no uncommon thing for ninepence out of every shilling paid into the box to be so spent, and while some Lodges were without doubt ruined by the prevailing custom, others were certainly prevented from becoming extinct, by the Meetings being used by the members as a convenient excuse for indulgence.

Into the origin of the old and wide-spread custom of drinking toasts I cannot now enter, nor have I time to deal with the special subject of Masonic toasts, although I hope to take this up at a later date. There is little doubt, however, that the practice of drinking toasts after every Lodge Meeting led among the Masons, as among other portions of society, to the excessive drinking which was unfortunately almost universal up to fifty years ago.

As early as 1719, Dr. Desaguliers, the Grand Master, immediately after his Installation, forthwith revived the old regular and peculiar Toasts or Healths of the Free Masons, and it was this practice which was probably responsible for most of the heavy drinking after Lodge Meetings, and the consequent degradation of many Freemasons in the days gone by.

I am not condemning or asking you to discontinue the Lodge supper, the annual banquet and the general practice of proposing and honouring Toasts there is much in these customs which conduces to sociability and good fellowship, and in some Lodges excellent speeches may frequently be heard, when Brethren are proposing or acknowledging the various Toasts; I am simply calling your attention to one phase of old Masonic life, which presents itself very frequently and very forcibly to all those who study the history of old eighteenth century Lodges.

At that time the customs, habits and language of the people, even of the educated classes, were not those of the present day. It was a time when the excesses of the table were freely indulged in; to be in a state of inebriation was not considered an offence against good manners, and the social refinements of our times had not been attained. (Vide History of the Lodge of Probity, p.74). This being the practice in all classes of the community, it is only natural that the Freemasons should follow the universal custom. They were not worse than others in their own station of life, but probably better, and in our criticisms we must ever bear in mind the present altered condition

of things, and never seek to judge our ancient Brethren by the standard of modern times.

Re-introduced then (in 1719), the drinking of Toasts soon became a prominent feature of Masonic Meetings, so much so, that during the singing of The Master's Song printed in the 1723 Book of Constitutions, and reprinted in the recently issued volume of this Lodge's Transactions, the singer interrupted no less than four times, in order that the Brethren might drink the health, or to the memory, of some Brother or Brethren.

In J. and B. (2nd Edit. 1762) we read, that the Ceremony of drinking healths among the Masons, takes up much of their time, and in many of the old eighteenth century exposures, there are whole pages full of masonic toasts from which the presiding officer could select, and after every one of which a bumper was drunk by the Brethren present.

Music and singing also occupied a very prominent position in the Masonic Convivialities of the past. In every eighteenth century Book of Constitutions, of both Grand Lodges, in every Pocket Companion, there was included a selection of Masonic Songs, while book after book was issued from the press consisting exclusively of songs suitable or supposed to be suitable, for Masonic gatherings, in many cases with the Music thereto, and printed from engraved copper plates.

And what is the theme of all this Masonic verse? High praise of the Masonic craft; eulogies of Solomon, Hiram, Hiram Abif, Tubal Cain, the reigning Grand Master, Royal Masons and other Masonic worthies, the exaltation of the Masonic virtues and incentives to Charity and Brotherly Love; all very excellent and praiseworthy. But mixed up with all this, there is the everlasting Toast, the constant call to honour some person or some sentiment. There are songs in praise of wine and extolling the pleasures of the glass, full of references to flowing wine, pure nectar, the generous glass, full bumpers, swelling cups, the flowing bowl, glasses charged full high, a noble toast, toast after toast. There are injunctions to charge your glasses high, to fill up the goblet, to crown the bowl and fill the glass, to pour the rosy wine again, to let the brisk bumper go merrily round, and when a specially important Toast was proposed, there rang out the command

Charge, Brethren! Charge your glasses to the top,
My toast forbids the spilling of a drop.

And according to what we know of the eighteenth century customs among Masons, this injunction was loyally obeyed. Toast followed Toast the evening through, the Brethren holding firmly to the belief that the bonds of friendship always tighten when they are wet.

Let me quote a few extracts from some of these Masonic songs, that we may gauge the quality of the eighteenth-century Masonic Muse.

SONG

(From Cole's Antient Constitutions, 1731)

Let malicious People censure;
They're not worth a Mason's answer.
 While we drink and sing,
 With no Conscience sting,
Let their evil Genius plague 'em,
And for Mollies Devil take 'em,
 We'll be free and merry,
 Drinking Port and Sherry,
Till the Stars at Midnight shine,
and our Eyes with them combine,
 The dark Night to banish;
 This we will replenish
 Nature, whilst the Glasses
 With the bottles passes:
 Brother Mason free,
 Here's to thee, to thee;
And let it, let it run the Table round,
While envy does the Masons Foes confound.

SONG

(From Cole's Antient Constitutions, 1731)

I
As I at Wheeler's Lodge one Night
 Kept Bacchus company;
For Bacchus is a Mason bright,
 And of all Lodges free free free..

II
Said I, great Bacchus is adry,
 Pray give the God some Wine;
Jove in a Fury did reply,
 October's as divine divine divine.

III
It makes us Masons more compleat,
 Adds to our Fancy Wings,
Makes us as happy and as great
 As mighty Lords and Kings Kings Kings.

CATCH

(From A Master-Key to Free-Masonry , 1760)

Ye Brethern all,
Whom Freemasons men call,
Without care or strife,
In joy pass this life.
Be a full brimmer still,
Your defence gainst all ill,
And the jovial glass fill,
To the health of all, Freemasons all,
We are Brethren, both great and small.

SONG

(From A Defence of Masonry , 1765)

II
Charge, then, with Liquid Powder,
Each his sound-bottom d Bumper;
As to the King
And Craft we sing,
It should be with a Thumper.

SONG

(From The Free Masons Pocket Companion , Glasgow, 1771)

He that will not merry merry be,
With a generous bowl and a toast,
May he in Bridewell be shut up,
And fast bound to a post.
Let him be merry merry there,
And we ll be merry merry here;
For who can know where we shall go,
To be merry another year?

SONG VI

(From The Free Masons Pocket Companion , Glasgow, 1771)

I
Pray don t sleep or thin,
But give us some drink,
for faith I m most plaguily dry,
 Wine cheers up the soul,
 Then fill up the bowl,
For ere long you all know we must die.

SONG XXX

(From The Free Masons Pocket Companion , Glasgow, 1771)

VI
Then fill up the goblet, and deal it about;
Each brother will see it thrice twenty times out.
Our pleasures, as well as our labours, can tell,
How free-hearted Masons all mankind excell.

SONG XLI

(From A Selection of Masonic Songs , Dublin, 1802)

Chorus
But when the glass goes round,
Then mirth and glee abound,
 We re all happy to a man;
We laugh a little, we drink a little,
We work a little, we play a little,
We sing a little, are merry a little,
 And swig the flowing can.

MASONIC CATCH XIV

(From A Selection of Masonic Songs , Dublin, 1802)

Hark the Hiram sounds to close,
 And we from work are free,
We ll drink and sing, and toast the King,
 And the Craft with a hearty three times three.

Hark, the Clock repeats high twelve,
It can't strike more we all well know;
Then ring, ring, ring, ring the bell,
For another bowl before we go.

Coming, coming, coming Sir, the waiter cries,
With a bowl to drown our care,
We're a hearty set on the level met,
And we always part on the square.

SONG XXXII

(From A Selection of Masonic Songs , Dublin, 1802)

Then charge my dear Brethren, a bumper all round,
To the brim fill each glass, let no day-light be found;
Here's a health to all Masons who honour the name,
By walking upright, and observing the same.

SONG

(From Cole's Antient Constitutions , 1731)

V
The World is all in Darkness,
About us they conjecture;
But little think
A Song and Drink
Succeeds the Masons' Lecture.

VI
Then, Landlord, bring a Hogshead,
And in the Corner place it,
Till it rebound
With hollow Sound,
Each Mason here will face it.

Chorus
Fill to him,
To the Brim;
Let it round the Table roll.
The Divine
Tells ye, Wine
Cheers the Body and the Soul.

SONG XXV
(From Ahiman Rezon , 1756)

I
Come, come my Brethren dear,
Now we re assembled here,
Exalt your Voices clear,
 With Harmony;
Here s none shall be admitted in,
Were he a Lord, a Duke, or King,
He s counted but an empty Thing,
 Except he s free.

Chorus
Let ev ry Man take Glass in Hand,
Drink Bumpers to our Master Grand,
As long as he can sit or stand,
 With Decency.

These extracts will amply suffice to show you the quality of the Masonic verse which satisfied our Brethren of the older times. What wonder, that with all this incentive to excess, they occasionally indulged, not wisely but too well, and that we find such entries in old minute-books as this:-- His worship retired about high time, and the members not very early the next morning. (History of the Old Kings Arms Lodge, p.68). Or as this The Brethren who attended this evening were very quiet and peacable, and went home in good time; there was no supper. (History of the Lodge of Probity, No. 61, p.101).

But time has changed all this, the Masonic Songs, from which I have quoted, are happily forgotten, and the books containing them are now only treasured as curiosities of literature, and interesting relics of past generations of Masons. Toasts, strictly limited in number, are still proposed and honoured after Masonic meetings, while the habits of the Fraternity will certainly compare favourably with those of any other portion of English society.

Into the controversy which from time to time rages round the general question of Lodge refreshment, I cannot now enter. Each Lodge must be the judge and decide its own practice, At the same time I am pleased to think, that with the passing years, there is a constantly diminishing number of Brethren, who become or remain members of the Masonic Craft, simply and solely for the sake of the good things partaken of after the closing of the Lodge.

This is good, but whilst we recognize, as an undoubted fact, that a fair proportion of the Brethren rarely if ever, remain for refreshment, we must take good care that the duty of hospitality is never forgotten or neglected, but that every stranger Brother who comes amongst us is heartily welcomed, and provided with the very best the Lodge has to offer. It is not the proper use, but the abuse of the good things provided, that is deserving of condemnation, but with the due exercise of Temperance and Prudence, the social board may become should indeed become a very useful, a very interesting, a very legitimate, and even a very elevating portion of our Masonic proceedings. Let us all unite to make it such.

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