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NO. 1.

WHAT IS THE GOOD OF FREEMASONRY?

[From All the Year Round.]

Extolled as the true faith, denounced as an offshoot of Satan, praised by crowned, and banned by tanned heads, dreaded as a subtle political engine, and admired for its profound indifference to politics, the essence of goodness according to some men, and the spirit of evil if you listen to others, Freemasonry is as complete a mystery to the uninitiated as when the mythical lady hid herself in the lodge clock-case, or the equally mythical American citizen was slain for tampering with its secrets. Listen to the words of wisdom, according to Bro. Stodgers, P.M., and you will learn that men may be Freemasons for years without penetrating the arcana of the Order; may attain divers dignities without comprehending their true import; may die in the fulness of Masonic parts without having emerged from Masonic boyhood; and after having spent as much time and labor on the art as would, to put it modestly, suffice for the acquisition of every European tongue, yet fall short of the supreme distinction of being a "good Mason." Whether, as the elder Mr. Weller, and the charity boy he quotes, respectively remarked of the institutions of holy matrimony, and of getting to the end of the alphabet, it be worth while going through so much to learn so little, is, I hear the cynic whisper, entirely a matter of opinion; but that neither the labour involved nor its reward is under-estimated, the most superficial knowledge with the subject proves.

Bro. Plover and myself have some right to our opinion, for we are Past Masters, Mark Masters, and Royal Arch Companions—are officers of our chapters, and Treasurers of our lodge. What our mutual and horsey friend Tibbins irreverently calls our "plated harness," involves medals, jewels, and ornate ribbons for our manly breasts, aprons for our fronts, and broad collars like those worn by Knights of the Garter (but handsomer) for our necks.

The Victoria Cross is an ugly excrescence compared to the costly decoration given me as a testimonial by the brethren of my mother lodge; the clasps to the jewels of some of our friends exceed in number those of the oldest Peninsula veteran, and we calculate that we might now be Sanskrit scholars of some eminence had we thought fit to serve that language as faithfully as we have served the Craft. Upon sordid money considerations we scorn to dwell. Initiation fees, exaltation fees, fees for advancement, emergencies, subscriptions to charities, to lodges, and for special purposes, make up a pretty sum to look back upon; and if the upshot of all were but the amusement and gratification derived, I am not prepared to say that we have had full value for our money. Joyous evenings, periodical feasts (in which

something else flows besides soul), mutual compliments, and pleasant friendships, may all spring from other sources than what Burns called "the mystic tie." With the warmest appreciation of the pleasures of Freemasonry, I, for one, should renounce the whole paraphernalia of collars, aprons, and giegaws, were I not satisfied of their practical value, and deeply impressed with their usefulness in stimulating to benevolent impulses and charitable deeds. This is, in truth, the chief virtue I care to claim for the Order, in this country, and in these times. Abroad, the Freemasons, so fiercely cursed by his Holiness the Pope, may mix up democratic caballing with their ceremonials, and play an important part in the spread of liberal principles, but in England, religious and political discussion are alike forbidden in lodge; and though in the olden days, when skilled craftsmen worked together in travelling bands, leaving magnificent monuments of civilisation and piety in their train, the objects of association were better understood, they were not more practical in their results than now. It is impossible to belong to a Masonic lodge, or even to eat Masonic dinners with regularity, without helping to support some of the most noble charities in the land. You are caught, we will say, by the promise of festivity and the hope of enjoyment. You know a jovial set, and would like to be one of them, and you are in due course proposed, elected, and initiated in some Masonic body. From that moment you are a cog in a mighty wheel, and can no more help moving with the rest of the machinery in the direction of good works, than you can avoid wearing your apron when on duty in your lodge.

Your earliest lesson is that of charity and toleration; but the great advantage of the rules of the community you have entered, is that no individual demerits or torpor can long withstand their beneficial tendency. Other precepts you may neglect or ignore. Your private life may be far from irreproachable. You may be depreciated by your fellow members as "a knife-and-fork Mason"—that is, one who cares more for the table of the tavern than the table of the law—and may be quoted by outsiders in proof of the evil effect of belonging to a secret society. All this rests with yourself. Even what we call the inner mysteries of our Order—mysteries which it takes so much time and application to master and comprehend—do not pretend to alter character. A selfish man will be a selfish Mason, a churlish man a churlish Mason, a conscientious man a conscientious Mason, to the end of time. It is wiser to disclaim all legermain, and freely confess that no purifying or awakening talisman is given to the Masonic neophyte. The knowledge imparted is moderate in extent, and the man obtaining it finds that he has but learnt the rudiments of an elaborate system, the true bearing of which is veiled in alle-