

The Side of the Road

A speech delivered when proposing the toast of a newly initiated Brother at Lodge Ferndale, No 400, Newcastle, N.S.W. on 3rd January, 1934.

Whenever I drive northwards from this city towards New England, I must of necessity pass a little farmhouse, which, every time I see it, awakens within me many very tender and sacred memories. I cannot avoid that little house - for it is on the Highway, by the side of the road. When I first knew it as a tiny child, nearly 40 years ago, it was a very humble place, built of slabs and lined with paper. Today in my mind's eye I can see the large open fireplace at the end of the slab kitchen, and how well I remember as a small boy on holidays, sitting round the cheery log fire on a winter's night, listening to the howling wind and the pouring rain, and in my timidity hugging still closer to my mother's knee, for I was bred in the city and strange at that time to the country.

I remember how we would sit on the grass between the house and the road, and in the quiet stillness of the starlit summer evening listen with childish wonder and amazement to the stories of the early pioneering days; how on a hot summer's day we would sit under the giant pear tree which grew just off the veranda, and enjoy, as only boys can, the luscious pears and grapes and watermelons grown on that farm; how we would climb the mulberry trees and enjoy the delicious fruit until face, hands and clothes were stained the colour of the mulberry, much to mother's annoyance.

But the strange thing about this house was that every traveller seemed to know it. There were other houses in that locality - some hidden among the thick timber - some far removed from the road - some very pretentious, with beautiful lawns and bordered drives, but travellers rarely called at them. They preferred this humble house by the side of the road. There were no motor-cars in those far off days. Fortunate indeed was the traveller who possessed a horse or buggy. In summer it was a hot and dusty road - in winter cold and dreary. But it mattered not, summer or winter, sunshine or rain, there was always a welcome at that home by the side of the road for the weary and needy traveller.

Well I remember as a schoolboy, spending a holiday there during a devastating drought, when crops and fruit trees failed, cattle died from lack of feed and water, wells and waterholes dried up, and weakened animals had to be driven every day for brackish water. They were days of hardship and suffering, but the welcome for the weary traveller never grew less. No one ever called at that house by the side of the road and went away hungry or thirsty. Many, many a 'tramp' have I seen sit under that pear tree and in its cooling shade enjoy the meal provided by that home, and left to resume his journey refreshed and encouraged.

You ask me 'What is Masonry?'

That is my answer. It is the house by the side of the Road. It is the abode of Love, Kindness, Help, and Friendship. It is that home from which flows the milk of human kindness, and the stream of a great Brotherhood. It is that home the inmates of which teach by precept the Golden Rule of life do unto others as you would have them do unto you it is that which expresses true and genuine love, in common service and in the daily tasks of life; it is that which stands out from other houses on Life's Highway; and is noted for its helping hand and its willingness to serve the common good.

You Brethren, who this night have been initiated into Masonry, have now entered that House by the Side of the Road and it will be your duty, as I also hope it will be your great joy and pleasure to afford help and succour to those who need it. You are now charged with a heavy responsibility, to uphold the great reputation of Masonry, a reputation which comes down the ages pure and unsullied, a great honour in that you are now associated with honourable men, who are endeavouring to live up to the traditions of that House by the Side of the Road, administering comfort and succour to the weary and unfortunates on Life's Highway, affording shelter and refuge from life's stormy blasts.

I urge you Brethren never to forget that charge delivered to you tonight in the N.E. and always remember the claims of those who are less fortunate than you. No matter what may be your station in life, whether you be favoured to tread the fields of affluence, or to walk the stony paths of poverty, never forget your fellows who

are also passing along Life's Highway, and who need your comfort, your help, your sympathy, your encouragement.

The occupants of the house that I have spoken of, were only poor farming people. They never knew material wealth, but they were kind and sympathetic. It may have been only a billy of tea, a few slices of bread, or a round of beef, but it was their best. Someone has said: "To get the best in Life, a Mason must give his best, and then throw in a smile for good measure."

There was always a very beautiful feature about that House by the Side of the Road.

When the needy one came begging for food or shelter, he was never questioned. His history was never enquired into. That mattered not - all that did count was that he needed help, he was 'down and out.' Why or how he got that way didn't matter. Theirs was the generous charity of thought. Masonry teaches us, Brethren, that not alone are we to exercise the virtue of material charity, not alone to give of our money and means, but to display the charity of thought and criticism. Be not hasty in our judgements. Be not harsh with our criticisms, but seek to find, and think the best of our fellows.

One more thought before I close. The happiest people of all were not those who received help at that House. Many a hungry soul has gone away filled with the necessities of life and joy in his heart. Many a dejected and weary tramp has gone away with a lighter step and a new inspiration. But I want you to believe Brethren, that not any of those had the joy and satisfaction of that humble farmer and his good wife, who gave of their best. Theirs was the greater joy, the greater satisfaction of having helped a needy soul. Well I remember one wild and stormy night as we were enjoying the warmth of the log-fire, a lone traveller came to the door begging food and shelter. He was a pitiable object - wet, cold, and hungry. A cup of tea, and good plain food were soon given to him, and he retired to the warmth of the barn. Turning to his wife, the farmer said, " Poor wretch; fancy being out on a night like this. Thank God we have a roof over our heads." Next morning one soul went on his way, invigorated and refreshed, to tread again the hard Highway of Life, but two souls rose to work, with light hearts filled with the greatest joy of having helped a needy one.

Brethren, you who have been initiated into Masonry to-night, I urge you to seek the greatest joy in life - that of being of some help and service to others. Brethren, let me say to you with all the emphasis possible, if you want to get joy and satisfaction out of Masonry, then live it! Let it become a living reality in your life. Let it be the great dynamic force that will urge you from day to day, to the noblest and highest service. May I close with an extract from that beautiful poem, The House by the Side of the Road.

The House by the Side of the Road

Let me live in a house by the side of the road,
Where the Race of Men go by -
The men who are good and the men who are bad,
As good and as bad as I
I would not sit in the scorner's seat,
Or hurl the cynic's ban -
Let me live in a house by the side of the road,
And be a friend to Man.

I see from my house by the side of the road,
By the side of the highway of Life,
The men who press on with the ardour of hope,
The men who are faint with strife.
But I turn not away from their smiles nor their tears -
Both parts of an infinite plan-
Let me live in my house by the side of the road,
And be a friend to Man.

I know there are brook-gladdened meadows ahead,
And mountains of wearisome height,
That the road passes on through the long afternoon
And stretches away to the night.

But still I rejoice when the travellers rejoice,
And weep with the strangers that moan,
Not live in my house by the side of the road,
Like a man who dwells alone.

Let me live in my house by the side of the road,
Where the Race of Men go by -
They are good, they are bad, they are weak, they are strong
Wise, foolish - so am I
Then why should I sit in the scorner's seat
Or hurl the cynic's ban?
Let me Live in my house by the side of the road,
And be a friend to Man.

Sam Walter Foss.