

Suffered Not in Vain

Charlotte Whitcomb

While looking over "The Early Records of Vermont Masonry," compiled by that veteran member of the Craft, W. H. S. Whitcomb, I read a paragraph to the effect—I cannot quote literally—that Rev. — —, being in great want and suffering persecution for believing in the principles of Freemasonry, the members of — Lodge voted him the sum of twenty dollars, and visited him. The incident aroused my curiosity, and I made inquiries, and read contemporaneous literature, from which I select material for the following sketch:

It was in that period of history known as the anti-Masonic crusade, and in that historic old Vermont town on Lake Champlain, which boasts of a university whose chief corner stone was laid by the great Lafayette, and which is further distinguished by being the burial place of Ethan Allen and a score of other heroes of the Revolution.

Here dwelt an unassuming and scholarly Christian gentleman, whom we shall call Jonathan Williams. He was a clergyman, and at the time our story begins, settled over a flourishing young church. He was a profound thinker and logician, a clear expounder of the orthodox doctrines, a zealous evangelist and a faithful pastor.

It is strange that at that time such a man should not have been a Freemason, but Mr. Williams had an almost Quixotic reverence for woman, and he had always said that he could never enter an organization where he could not take with him his mother and his wife.

About this time occurred the disappearance of Morgan from Batavia, New York. The Vermonters, fired with indignation over what they were led to believe a barbarous crime, were ready to send to the pillory, or the stake, every man belonging to the suspected fraternity.

Feeling ran so high that families were divided, brother raising his hand against brother, friends of a lifetime became enemies, neighborhood feuds arose, pastors became fiercely denunciatory, and people rose against pastors. The wives and children of prominent Masons were persecuted, hunted and tabooed as criminals.

The situation was deplored by many good and thoughtful men outside the Fraternity, who, however, believing discretion to be the better part of valor, kept their thoughts to themselves. Not so Rev. Mr. Williams, as with him to think was to act. He began to preach a series of sermons intended to teach moderation, tolerance and equity. His texts were: "Lo, I give you a new commandment, that ye love one another." "He that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?" And "Judge not lest ye be also judged."

He preached the first of these three sermons to a surprised and disapproving congregation; during the second many of his people rose and left the meeting-house. The third was preached to mostly empty pews, and before the fourth was prepared the officials of his charge requested his resignation. Nothing daunted, he buckled on his spiritual armor for the fray. He preached, whenever he could get hearers, the gospel of love and reconciliation, but he at once became an object of persecution. He was hissed and silenced in public; his children were abused if they ventured out alone, and he presently found himself friendless and in want of the necessaries of life. He worked with

his hands at whatever he could get to do, but insufficient food, overwork and anxiety told upon his constitution, and he fell ill.

His heroic old mother and his loyal wife comforted, cheered and encouraged him, but their extremity came when the fuel was exhausted and the last morsel of bread was gone. Cold, hungry, and in darkness, the suffering but undaunted family huddled together for warmth, and tried to feel contented for conscience sake. The elder could endure, but he hungry cries of the children were heartrending.

They had hitherto prayed with thanksgiving for the morsels that had day after day supplied their most pressing want, but now utter destitution was their portion. Then the brave old mother said, "Let us pray!" and all joined in that sacred petition of our blessed Lord: "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen."

Then Jonathan Williams' voice was heard:

"ALMIGHTY GOD, Thou who didst feed our fathers manna in the wilderness, who beareth the young ravens when they cry and keepeth the little sparrows unhurt, send us, we pray Thee, for our famished bodies, bread!

"Thou that keepeth Israel, and doth neither slumber nor sleep, defend us from hunger, cold, and the fear of our enemies, and O great God! Grant that as our mortal bodies hunger for meat, so may our spirits hunger and thirst after righteousness. Feed us, O thou great Jehovah, both in body and soul, that we may do farther service for Thee in the name of CHRIST."

Hardly was the amen spoken when there came a low rap at the door. Mrs. Williams opened it, when there was thrust into her hand a letter, and disguised men stealthily entered, bearing food and fuel, lights and clothing.

Night after night the mysterious visitants brought material answers to the prayers of Jonathan Williams and family, until, with restored health and changed circumstances, he again became bread-winner for his loved ones.

If, in after years, when he had become an honored and outspoken member of the Craft, his eye fell on the paragraph quoted above, it may have given him a knowledge of who his earthly benefactors were. He knew of it in no other way.

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