

THE TYLER'S TOAST

by Lewis J. Birt (New Jersey) ROYAL ARCH MASON - 1980

One of the more delightful and interesting of all Masonic Ceremonies is the Table Lodge, or the Festive Board. An almost essential part of such a gathering is the "Tyler's Toast." It is not a part of any Masonic ritual, but it is a charming part of the work that adds a little something to the overall ceremony. The form or wording may vary somewhat from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, nor is it always known as the Tyler's Toast because it is not always proposed by the Tyler. In some cases it is known as "The Toast to Ancient Brethren." Probably the most commonly used wording is this:

"To All Poor and Distressed Masons, wherever they may be, dispersed over the face of the earth or on the water, here's wishing them a relief from their sufferings, and a happy return to their native land, should they so desire it."

To place a date on when this or a similar toast was introduced into the ancient ceremonies of the Craft is not easy as our ancient Brethren in the early Lodges lived closely by their obligations about committing any of their ceremonies to paper. "Silence and Circumspection" may be good for Masonic conduct, but they make for very poor history. Thus we can take only a few facts and accounts and from those make a few assumptions. The earliest (probably) recorded reference to this toast may be the one in Laurence Dermott's Ahiman Rezon, published in 1756. The "Book of Constitutions" of those years usually contained many pages of Masonic Songs which the members probably engaged in singing after the Lodge was over. These were usually rather long and rambling and were frequently interrupted to propose a toast, or "drink the health of. . .," various persons or groups. On page 148 began this song which continued for two more pages and ended with this stanza:

My Brethren, all take Glass in Hand,

And toast our noble Master Grand,

And in full chorus sing,

And in &c.,

A Health to ancient Masons Free,

Throughout the Globe, where-e'er they be,

And so God save the King,

And so God save the King.

To all Ancient Masons, wheresoever dispers'd,

or oppressed, round the Globe, &c.

This custom of engaging in song after the Lodge was over is noted in many instances in the earliest days of the Craft. It is noted that Dr. Desaguliers, after being installed the third Grand Master in 1719, "reviv'd the old regular and peculiar Toasts of Freemasonry." They were not named although some of them are mentioned in Anderson's "Constitutions of 1723" among the songs included in the book, some sixteen pages of such. The fact that Dermott used "&c." in the toast cited above would seem to indicate that it was well known to all, so that the printing of the full form would not be necessary. In contrast, many of the toasts that were mentioned in this edition were printed in their entirety. The toast does not appear in Anderson's Constitutions of 1738, so we might assume that it came into practical use between 1738 and 1756. Bernard E. Jones stated that the earlier form of this toast was: "To all charitable and distressed Masons dispersed over So if we assume that this toast or health may have entered Masonic use about 1740 or 1750, we can look to that time as a period of expansion of Masonry in England. The Grand Lodge was only twenty or thirty years old and growing. England was expanding into Empire and deeply engaged in the wars on the continent and in America. Many of those who were engaged in these engagements were Masons. This is certain for we can note the many military lodges and colonial warrants issued which surely show a number of Brethren in foreign lands or in the Royal Navy. Surely the brethren at home would be apt to remember their Brethren "wheresoever scattered over the face of the Earth and on the Water..... To make this a custom, almost a ritual, would be a natural outgrowth of this remembrance. At the same time we might also make note of the fact that the concluding words of this toast were sometimes modified by adding the words - "should they so desire and deserve it." The addition of those words - "and deserve it" - would be a reflection of the conditions and times. There were many Englishmen impressed into service (shanghaaiing is more like it) and undoubtedly many would be Masons. They would

enjoy "a happy return to their native land" and surely would deserve it. There were others who were "transported" - a term used to describe the forced emigration of convicts, and surely they would not "deserve it." This is not to put down all of those who were "transported" as many of those formed and became good members of lodges in the land to which they were transported - Solomon's Lodge No. 1 of Savannah, being an example: others in Australia and other colonies. In a song included in William Preston's "Illustrations of Masonry," of 1776, there is a line which goes: "The absent we claim, tho' dispers'd round the ball which places that toast as fourth among six healths given in that song. So placing it fourth does not mean that it should always be given last or just before closing. The American Lodge of Research, chartered under the Grand Lodge of New York, usually halts labor at nine o'clock (or as near to that hour as is convenient) so that all members may rise and give the Tyler's Toast. In this case (ALR) the first mention in the Proceedings of this custom was April 25, 1933, "at 9:00 P.M. the Master announced the singing of the Tiler's [sic] Toast." On March 29, 1954, the Transactions state: "At the traditional hour of 9 o'clock, the Tiler's Toast to absent brethren was observed in silence." In Massachusetts at the grand Feast (1972), this Toast was given by the Grand Master: G.M. - "To the Fraternity wheresoever dispersed upon the face of the earth. May Masons of all nations be united under the mantle of universal Friendship and Brotherhood for the benefit of all mankind."

Brethren: - To the Brethren wheresoever dispersed.

In Western Australia, the Tyler's Toast is listed as the fifth of the standard toasts that are given at the Festive Board. According to Mackey, in the French Lodges prior to 1872, there is this toast - To "The Health of all Masons wheresoever spread over the two hemispheres As a matter of fact, this toast was not given by the Tyler in the early days of the Craft. Bernard E. Jones pointed out that in some early English Lodges it was given by the Senior Warden, and the Junior Warden then proposed a toast to "our next Meeting." In some cases it has been noted that it is given by the Master. At the present time when the Tyler proposes this toast, it is usually last or just prior to closing. Otherwise it is given as one of the standard ceremonial toasts (usually seven, but this number will vary).

The Lodge Service Committee of the Grand Lodge of Iowa, A.F. & A.M., in 1978, published a format for giving the Tyler's Toast. It is presented here in full:

"7. The Tyler's Toast: (Always given by the Tyler) Then to our final toast tonight, our glasses freely drain, happy to meet, sorry to part, happy to meet again.

Dear Brethren of the Mystic Tie, the night is waning fast.

Our work is done, our feast is o'er, this toast must be our last. Good night to all, once more good night, again that farewell strain. Happy to meet, sorry to part, happy to meet again.

To all poor and distressed Masons, wheresoever dispersed (over the face of the earth or water), a speedy relief to their suffering, and a safe return to their native land if they so desire. (Three knocks) With me, my brethren, To All Poor and Distressed Masons! (Drink and present arms as before, glasses down at the same instant as Tyler's.)

There is no response to the Tyler's Toast."

Probably there would not be a complete story about the Tyler's Toast if we did not mention that Rudyard Kipling, a Mason raised in India, used it as the subject or inspiration of his poem "The Widow at Windsor." Without taking that whole story here is only the last stanza:

Then 'ere's to the Son's o' the Widow.

Wherever, 'owever they roam.

'Ere's all they desire, an' if they require,

A speedy return to their 'ome.

(Poor beggars! - they'll never see 'ome!)

A final note - there is no authority that has stated why it is called Tyler's Toast. In fact, as noted above, there is no set rule that says it will be proposed by the Tyler. Even when it is referred to as the Tyler's Toast in some jurisdictions that have regulations governing Table Lodges, it may be given by some officer other than the Tyler. It may just be that with the Tyler outside the door doing his duty, he was selected to give the Toast to the Absent Brethren because from his position he was almost as absent as they during the festivities. So There!!