

A FAMOUS FRENCH LODGE*

(Les Neuf Soeurs)

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THE LODGE of the Nine Muses (*Les Neuf Soeurs*), often referred to as the Lodge of the Nine Sisters, was probably the most famous of all French Lodges. Mention of it is made in many reference books, Masonic and otherwise, but the standard history of the Lodge is the book by Louis Amiable, published in 1897 and entitled *Une Loge maçonnique d'avant 1789, la R.: L.: Les Neuf Soeurs*.

This book is now quite rare and, although no doubt there are other copies extant, I know of only two, those in the Bibliothèque Nationale (Ref.: 8° H6305) and in the Library of Quatuor Coronati Lodge. That is my excuse for preparing this paper, which I freely acknowledge is based on it.

There is an announcement in the front of the book to the effect that Louis Amiable, Jurist, former Mayor of the 5th District of Paris, Counsellor at the Court of Appeal in Aix-en-Provence, Grand Orator of the Grand College and former Member of the Council of the Grand Orient of France, died at Aix on 23 January 1897, the day after he had penned the last words of this book, which was therefore published by his friends without the benefit of his corrections.

Before actually proceeding with the story of the Lodge however, there are two matters to which I wish to refer.

Firstly, one of the illustrations in the book is a reproduction of a Certificate issued on 19 June 1782 to F. Pastoret, a member of the Lodge, later to become its Master. It contains the signatures of such notable persons as Lalande, philosopher and astronomer, Elie de Beaumont, Advocate to Parliament, Vernet, painter and member of the Council of the Royal Academy of Painting, Cailhava, Man of Letters, Goucher, Choffard and Godefroy, Engravers, and Degede, Musician.

Secondly, in the Chapter dealing with Louis XVI, Amiable makes the definite statement that he was a Freemason and he says that a Lodge named *La Militaire des Trois-Frères Unis* was founded on 1 August 1775 à l'orient de la Cour for the King and his two brothers, the Comte de Provence and the Comte d'Artois. He also states that he gives documentary evidence of this in an article in *La Révolution Française* (December 1895 t. XXIX, pp. 326-33) under the title, *Les Bourbons francs-maçons*. As I have not had an opportunity of referring to this article, I can do no more than express surprise at this statement.

Turning now to the Lodge of the Nine Muses, it seems that it was the brain-child of Claude-Adrien Helvétius (1715-71), a prominent Mason of substantial means who was a great patron of the arts. He conceived the idea of establishing a lodge in Paris that would attract not only men of letters, but men of all the arts and sciences, and he interested his friend and brother Mason, Jerome Lalande, the famous French astronomer, in this project.

Lalande, who was an active Grand Officer, had had a similar but more restricted idea and had established the Lodge of the Sciences, of which he was Master, a Lodge confined to Masons concerned with scientific research.

However, it was not possible at that time for any new lodges to be consecrated as it was a time of strife and trouble for Masonry and a State Decree had been laid before Grand Lodge on 21 February 1767, forbidding it to meet. By the time these difficulties were over and the Lodge was consecrated, Helvétius had been dead some five years and so did not live to see either the rebirth of Masonry in France or the fruition of his idea.

Lalande, who was Grand Senior Warden of the Grand Orient, did not forget his promise to his old friend. He deliberately refrained from resuscitating the Lodge of the Sciences and concerned himself with establishing the Lodge of the Nine Muses, which was eventually consecrated on 9 July 1776. He was the first Master, the other members being:

1. Abbé Cordier de Saint-Firmin, cleric and man of letters.
2. Le Changeux, philosopher and author.
3. Abbé Robin, cleric and author.

* [An Address given to Phoenix Lodge of Research No. 30 (Paris) on 28 October 1972. Ed.]

4. Chevalier de Cubières, Squire of the Countess of Artois, poet and prolific author.
5. Fallet, poet and dramatist.
6. De Cailhava, dramatist.
7. Garnier, lawyer, man of letters and minor poet.
8. Chauvet, of the Bordeaux Academy of Sciences.
9. De Parny, squire of the Queen, but otherwise unknown.

This was a small number with which to found a Lodge, but within a year, its membership had increased to 60 and within three years, to 144, including Voltaire and Benjamin Franklin, together with 16 honorary members. Such growth was indeed remarkable, especially as the Regulations as to admission into the Lodge were extremely strict and every man of letters had to be prepared to deliver an oration at the first meeting after his acception, whilst each musician had to perform something of his own composition. No doubt Lalande's position and influence accounted for a great deal.

Within two years of its foundation, the Lodge of the Nine Muses published a *List of Regulations*, which, in addition to giving a list of members, emphasized that the reason for founding the Lodge was to encourage the cultivation of the sciences and the arts, especially literature, as it was believed that a study of the fine arts, coupled with a sense of duty, was the basis of all Masonic virtues; that it made, in fact, the perfect Mason.

By this time, the Lodge had acquired a considerable membership and we find no less than 25 officers cited in the list, including three Orators: Le Changeux, a philosopher, and two men of letters, de la Dixmerie and the Abbé Renny, who was also a Parliamentary Advocate. Quite obviously their Lodge duties were important. The musical activities were under the supervision of two Directors of Concerts.

There were several Committees that dealt with different aspects of the Lodge's activities, but the Lodge itself met at monthly intervals with the exception of September and October. The Lodge proceedings were followed by a banquet and it was on these occasions that the musical members entertained their brethren and that the men of letters, to use that delightful French Masonic expression, presented their pieces of architecture (*morceaux d'architecture*), i.e. delivered discourses of various kinds.

Three of these meetings were regarded as of particular importance: those held on or near 24 June (St. John the Baptist's festival), 27 December (St. John the Evangelist) and 9 March (Opening of the Masonic year).

Reverting to the Regulations of the Lodge, it is interesting to note the setting up of a fund to provide for the publication of works by members of the Lodge, assuming that the works were found worthy by a Committee which was established by the Lodge specifically to assess their merits.

In addition, members of the Lodge who were connected with the Legal or Medical professions were expected to give their services free of charge to anyone recommended to them by the Lodge and funds were also made available to provide legal documents for the defence of persons deemed to be innocent of charges levelled against them. This type of assistance was not restricted to Lodge members, for they pledged themselves 'to fly to the aid of humanity' and that meant to them, humanity as a whole, not merely the Masonic fraternity.

Quite apart from this, the Lodge contributed generously to outside Charities. Many indigent persons were aided financially, monetary help was given each year to poor students, a number of poor children were educated, apprenticed to suitable trades and then helped until they became self-supporting and many collections were made for other charitable purposes.

It is not surprising therefore that we find in the list of members of the Lodge the names of so many prominent artists, using that word in its widest sense. Naturally the majority were French but we also find England, Germany, Russia, Sweden, Italy and Spain represented. The fame of the Lodge certainly spread beyond the frontiers of France.

What many would regard as the Lodge's greatest claim to fame however, lay in an entirely different direction. The Lodge of the Nine Muses will be famous for all time for having initiated Voltaire into the mysteries of Freemasonry, a masonic event that not only was of great importance to the Lodge, but which had widespread repercussions in the world outside.

Voltaire had for many years been regarded as an arch-enemy by the Church authorities and by many of the Court Officials and Louis XVI had stated publicly that he neither liked nor cared for him. Voltaire had, in fact, found it desirable to leave Paris more than a quarter of a century previously and had been living quietly at Ferney near the Swiss frontier where, although his views on formal religion had not changed, he had carried out his religious duties, attending

Mass at Easter and on the important Holy Days, and where, when the local Church fell into disrepair, he built a larger and more beautiful one, which was inscribed '*Deo erexit Voltaire*' ('Erected to God by Voltaire').

This is added proof that although Voltaire was opposed to the external trappings and forms of official religion and although he fought against its abuses, nevertheless he believed in T.G.A.O.T.U. and had all the qualities required of a candidate for Freemasonry.

By 1778 Voltaire was in his 84th year and his health, which had not been good for many years, had deteriorated considerably. He probably realized that his end could not be far off and he was anxious to see Paris again before he died. Accordingly, he left his home at Ferney on 5 February and arrived in Paris five days later, staying at a house on what is now known as the Quai Voltaire.

The journey had proved to be a great strain on him. He suffered a severe haemorrhage and his doctor gave him only a week to live. On 2 March, he made a final confession in which he said '... with God's help, I die in the Holy Catholic religion in which I was born'.

However, his health improved considerably, and on 25 March he received a deputation from the Lodge of the Nine Muses, headed by Lalande who was a friend of his. This visit only adds to a mystery that has never been solved.

It is contended by some that Voltaire was initiated in an English Lodge about fifty years prior to this though no evidence has ever been produced to substantiate it. At the meeting, Voltaire denied that he had ever been a Mason, but he signed a copy of the *Constitutions* and promised to attend Lodge again! It was then decided that he should be initiated in the Lodge of the Nine Muses, as it mattered little that he had been made a Freemason previously and had become a stranger to the fraternity. (My translation of Amiable's text.)

Amiable seems to think it quite possible that Voltaire was initiated in England and gives several reasons why this might have been ignored, ending with the suggestion that from motives of patriotism, Voltaire perhaps wished to consider invalid an initiation undergone in a foreign obedience.

Another extraordinary fact is that, at his initiation on 7 April, Voltaire was accepted as one who had already received Masonic light, so that it was not necessary for him to receive it again.

The Lodge room was elaborately decorated for the occasion and included were busts of the King, the Duke of Chartres, Frederick II of Prussia and Helvétius. Lalande occupied the Chair, having the Count de Strogonoff, Privy Councillor of the Empress of Russia, as his acting Senior Warden, and Lt. Col. de Laroche as acting Junior Warden. There was a full attendance of members of the Lodge and over 250 visitors, many of them Officers of the Grand Orient and others of note, including Benjamin Franklin, Minister Plenipotentiary of the United States of America, who was subsequently to become a joining Member and its second Master.

Voltaire entered the Lodge, escorted by Franklin and the Count de Gebelin and, after answering several questions on philosophy and morality asked by the Worshipful Master, advanced to the East, took his Obligation and was entrusted with the signs, tokens and words of the First Degree. He was then seated in the East whilst the Master read an eulogy in his honour, from a passage in which it is interesting to note that obviously the trowel had figured as a tool during the initiation. Voltaire was then invested with the Apron of Helvétius, which had been presented by his widow for that purpose.

Several musical selections had been given during the ceremony and now various poems and songs written for the occasion were offered. Amiable quotes a verse from a song composed by de la Dixmerie and although translation of French verse into English verse is fraught with difficulties, I have attempted it with the following result:

*'Unto the name of our Illustrious Brother
Each Mason sings a triumph song today
And as he now receives the light from us,
He gives it to the World the self-same way.'*

A banquet followed but, after the first few toasts, Voltaire, who had been tired by the ceremony, retired.

Four days later, Voltaire was received by the Grand Master, the Duke of Chartres, together with the Duchess and a boy of five, the future King Louis Philippe. This was his last Masonic occasion. Early in May his health took a very definite turn for the worse and he died on 30 May.

On the following 28 November, a Lodge of Sorrow was held in Voltaire's memory, presided over by Lalande with Franklin and de Strogonoff as Wardens. The Lodge was completely hung

in black, illuminated with funereal lights and relieved only by gold and silver garlands, forming arches between which were transparencies on which were either quotations from his works or else phrases honouring his memory.

In the middle of the Temple was a Cenotaph on a dais of four steps, surmounted by a pyramid, on one side of which was depicted Poetry and on the other History, both weeping over the death of Voltaire. It was guarded by 27 brethren with drawn swords, 27, of course, being 3 multiplied by 3 multiplied by 3, and in front of it were three broken columns, with copies of Voltaire's works and several laurel wreaths on the central one, whilst on the others were vases containing burning incense.

The orchestra played whilst visitors, numbering some 150 in all, entered through a darkened vault and were introduced. Madame Denis, Voltaire's niece, and the Marquise de Villette, whom Voltaire regarded as his adopted daughter, were then announced and permitted to enter, after which Masonic ceremonial was suspended.

Le Changeux and de Caron delivered funeral orations and were followed by de la Dixmerie who gave the principal eulogy. There was then a musical selection and finally a tableau in honour of Voltaire.

After this the brethren adjourned to the Banqueting Hall and a table lodge was opened, when Houdon's bust of Voltaire, which had been given to the Lodge by Madame Denis, was displayed on a triumphal arch formed by wreaths of flowers.

The initiation of Voltaire had brought prestige to the Lodge of the Nine Muses, but it brought trouble as well and from a surprising source, the Grand Orient itself. Jealousy on the part of a number of their Grand Officers resulted not only in the Lodge being forbidden the use of the main Temple and relegated to a small room, not big enough for its members let alone for any visitors, but also in having all its belongings, including the bust of Voltaire, thrown out in a peremptory manner. Complaints were also laid against it for having admitted the two ladies to the ceremony in honour of Voltaire, together with two non-Masons.

An official enquiry was held, when a long list of complaints was laid against the Lodge including that of having non-Masonic works read of such a scandalous nature that it was likely to bring the Craft into disrepute and result in a persecution of Masonry throughout the whole of France.

Lalande, who had been invited to be present, asked to be supplied with a copy of the charges, so that he could reply in writing and the firmness of his demeanour, coupled with the undesirability of having a protracted debate, caused the Grand Orient to drop its charges.

The Lodge continued to be subjected to petty spitefulness however and soon another major dispute arose. A system of Masonry for Ladies had come into existence, involving an Initiation Ceremony somewhat different in form from that of the Craft, and known as Adoptive Masonry.

From early in its existence, the Grand Orient had given official approval to Lodges of Adoption, stipulating however that every such Lodge must be attached to a Craft Lodge, which would be responsible for it, and that the Master of such Craft Lodge or his deputy must always be present and preside over their meetings. Moreover, their members must always be wives, widows or close relatives of Freemasons.

The Lodge of the Nine Muses decided to hold a festival on 9 March 1779 to celebrate the anniversary of its foundation and for this purpose it decided to hold a Lodge meeting and then, two and a half hours later, to introduce ladies for a Lodge of Adoption, after which there was to be a Concert and Banquet followed by a Ball.

Unfortunately, not only did the proceedings not go as planned but, in addition, members of the Lodge of the Nine Muses, no doubt with the best intentions, introduced a number of innovations into the ceremony and ended up with selecting a candidate for initiation from amongst the females present. An uproar resulted and the meeting had to be closed, but peace was then restored and the Concert, Banquet and Ball passed without further incident.

No doubt the Lodge had acted unwisely but the opportunity was seized by its opponents to renew their persecutions. An extraordinary meeting of the Grand Lodge Committee for dealing with such matters was called for 19 March and the meeting was specially 'packed' for the occasion. A list of the charges against the Lodge was read and by a unanimous vote it was decided that a verdict should be announced immediately.

Another unanimous vote decreed that the Lodge of the Nine Muses be dissolved and that its name be suppressed for ever. The Abbé Cordier was debarred from Masonry for 81 months, that odd number being three times three times three, the Master, Lalande, was debarred for 9 months, the Wardens for 7 months, the Orator for 5 months and the others for 3 months.

Fortunately wiser counsels prevailed at the Grand Lodge meeting held five days later, when Lalande, referred to as the former Master of the Lodge of the Nine Muses, successfully pleaded that the decision should not be published until the Lodge had been given an opportunity to defend itself.

The Lodge took immediate and vigorous steps to do just that and appointed three members to represent it, de la Dixmerie, Count de Gebelin and Count de Persan. Eventually, at a meeting held on 20 May, the Grand Orient re-established its honour and its prestige by deciding to annul the previous decision and to restore the Lodge to all its rights. The case was then referred to the Chamber of Paris which, in the following September, decided to pass the trowel of brotherly love over any irregularities there might have been and, after a few more rumblings, the case passed into oblivion.

Lalande had now been Master of the Lodge for three years, years that by no means had been uneventful, and these responsibilities, in addition to his scientific and literary activities, must have imposed a great strain on him, so it is not surprising that he refused to be considered for a further term.

Benjamin Franklin, who had become a Joining Member shortly after the initiation of Voltaire, was elected in his stead on 21 May 1779 and was presented with the Apron worn by Helvétius and Voltaire. It may seem strange that in a Lodge as large as this, containing so many eminent Frenchmen amongst its members, the choice should have fallen on a foreigner, but no doubt it was felt that the recent troubles had not yet subsided and that if the Minister Plenipotentiary of the United States were Master of the Lodge, their enemies would hesitate to take any action against it.

This move seems to have had the desired effect, for the two years during which Franklin was Master were free of troubles such as had plagued his predecessor and in the words of R. F. Gould, the Lodge 'regarded Franklin with such veneration that it struck a medal in his honour'.

It is of interest to note however that, during this term, John Paul Jones, the hero of the War of American Independence and therefore a hero of the French, joined the Lodge and on 1 May 1780 the Lodge held a festival in his honour.

Later that year, the Lodge founded the Apollonian Society which, in a way, was a duplication of itself. Its first meeting was on 17 November, when members read papers, recited poems and read extracts of various works. It was intended to publish a magazine containing selected items, but this project was subsequently dropped.

These meetings attracted large audiences and, to accommodate them, a building was erected in the rue Dauphine, bearing the inscription, 'Museum of Paris, founded on 17th November, 1780 in the seventh year of the reign of Louis August.'

The success of this venture resulted in the foundation late the following year of a similar Museum of Science at which courses in Mathematics, Sciences, Languages and other subjects were offered and this institution, under its later name the Lyceum, near the Palais Royal in the rue Saint-Honoré, soon outstripped its parent.

It finally disappeared in the troubles of 1848, but it must be emphasized that these two famous institutions were born of Freemasonry and of the Lodge of the Nine Muses in particular.

In May 1781, Franklin was succeeded in the Chair by the Marquis de la Salle who, in addition to being an officer of the Grand Orient, had held office in various other Parisian Lodges and, two years later, he was followed by the Count de Milly.

He, in his turn, was followed in 1784 by Dupaty, President of the Bordeaux Parliament, renowned for his speeches in defence of liberty which, some fourteen years earlier, had earned him periods of imprisonment and exile. When he left for Italy the following year, Elie de Beaumont was elected in his place and he was the first Master to die in office after occupying the Chair for only eight months.

There is then a gap in the list and we know only that Pastoret was Master in 1788.

It was during this period, however, in 1786-7, that the Lodge was engaged in what, in one way, was its most famous battle. One of the obligations taken by members, as I have indicated previously, was to 'fly to the aid of humanity' and they fulfilled this obligation to the uttermost at this time when they went to the aid of three men they believed to be innocent, but who had been condemned to death by the Paris Parliament. Bro. Dupaty was engaged for over twelve months in a legal battle to save their lives and he paid out more than one hundred pounds, a very substantial sum in those days, for the printing of documents for their defence. It is to his eternal credit and to the credit of the Lodge as a whole that, after a tremendous and prolonged fight, three obviously innocent men were snatched from the jaws of death.

Soon after this, the Lodge was to face something it could not fight, the Revolution, and in 1789 it suffered the fate of almost all Lodges in France in having to close down. Some members however formed themselves into a literary and musical Society known as the National Society of the Nine Muses and this body achieved what the Museum had failed to do by publishing periodically the works of its members but, in 1792, it became dormant.

Masonry revived again in France in 1795, but it was not until late in 1805 that the Lodge of the Nine Muses met again and amongst its members at that time we find five of its founders of thirty years previously, Lalande, Cordier de Saint-Firmin, Abbé Robin, Chevalier de Cubières and de Cailhava and at least thirty-five other former members.

Amongst the others, Alexandre-Louis Roettiers de Montaleau must be mentioned. In 1793 he was an officer of the Grand Orient and Master of Amity Lodge in Paris. He was arrested and, whilst in prison, courageously continued to direct his Lodge, although he seemed fated to end his life in the hands of 'Madame Guillotine'. However, he was released unexpectedly and it was he who was largely responsible for the re-establishment of the Grand Orient in 1795, of which he remained Grand Master until the end of 1804.

The former members of the Lodge were by this time too advanced in age to play an active part in affairs and the character of the Lodge was vastly different from the pre-Revolution days. Conditions of membership were substantially modified, the active encouragement of the fine arts disappeared, and members were no longer called upon to 'fly to the aid of humanity'.

In March 1807 Lalande accepted, with considerable reluctance, the office of Master once again. In his inaugural address he spoke with his customary eloquence, but with a sadness that was quite uncharacteristic. He spoke of a past of which he saw no evidence in the present and of their early hopes of philosophy and of freedom, of which he saw no trace. He spoke of his approaching end and although he seemed in good health, he was wiser than they knew, for only a few days later, in his 85th year, he passed to the Grand Lodge above.

There is little to say of the succeeding years and as Amiable said, its sterility contrasted strangely with its former activity. From 1810 until 1828, Delagrangé, a famous lawyer, was Master and when he gave up office, the Lodge had only twenty members. However, it was suddenly strengthened by the influx of fifty-six members from the Lodge *Saint-Louis de France* but, following the Revolution of 1830, the Lodge again became inactive.

Six years later, it was revived a second time, once more under the Mastership of Delagrangé, more than five hundred visitors being present at the re-opening and it is of interest to note that the bust of Voltaire was restored to a place of honour at this meeting.

The promise of this occasion was not to be maintained however. Within two years the membership had dropped to twenty-five. Delagrangé was Master again from 1839 to 1841, though over 70 years of age, and after this we hear little of the Lodge.

It had no Master but only a Deputy for the next four years and, although a Grand Officer, Bro. Blanchet was Master in 1846-7; the Lodge finally disappeared in the aftermath of the 1848 Revolution. To quote Amiable, 'The Lodge of Lalande, Voltaire and Franklin vanished for ever like a stream that flows into the desert and ends by disappearing into the sand.'

Perhaps it was inevitable. The Lodge had accomplished too much in too short a time. In its early days it had achieved a substantial membership that included the elite of French Masonry, noblemen, brethren holding important positions in the Church, State, Army, Law, Philosophy and Literature, Members of the Academies and prominent painters, sculptors, engravers, architects and musicians. The Lodge had risen too soon to too great heights and from there it could only decline. It could not live with its own past.
