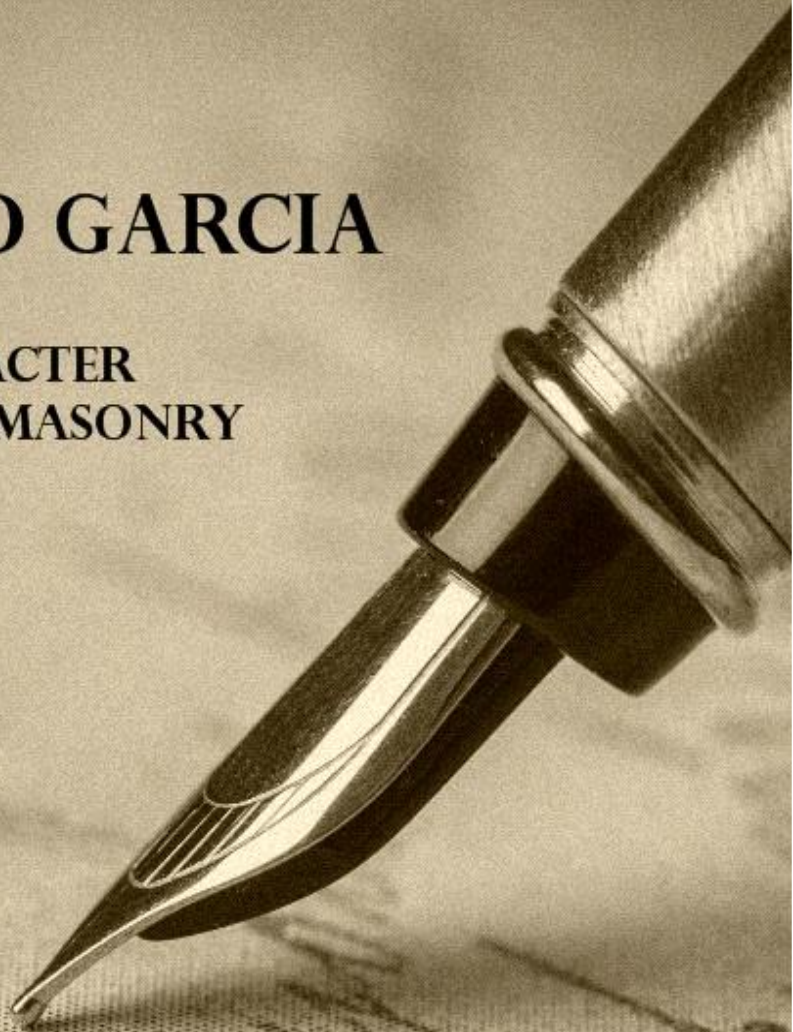


A MESSAGE TO GARCIA

THE POWER OF CHARACTER
AND INIATIVE IN FREEMASONRY



JOHN W. BIZZACK, PH.D

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BSF Foundation, Lexington, Kentucky



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A *Message to Garcia* was originally published as filler without a title in the March 1899 issue of the avant-garde magazine, *The Philistine*, a periodical published in East Aura, New York. The publication, at the time, was written entirely by American writer, publisher, artist, and philosopher, Elbert Hubbard.¹



Elbert Hubbard

Soon after the appearance of the untitled article, orders came for more copies and eventually reprints (reported to be as many as 225 million by 1926) were distributed around the world.² The message of the inspirational essay spawned two Hollywood films, was translated into 37 languages, and became well-known in American popular and business culture until the middle of the twentieth century.

In the publication, Elbert Hubbard writes about a discussion he had one evening with his son, Bert. They talked about the war with Spain that had just ended in an American victory after a 113-day conflict. His son posed the question, “Who was the real hero of the war?” He began the discussion by asking his father, “Was it Colonel Theodore Roosevelt, who led his Rough Riders in a famous charge up San Juan Hill outside the port of Santiago de Cuba? Was it Admiral George Dewey, who shattered a Spanish fleet in Manila Harbor in the Philippines? Was it the young Navy officer, Richmond P. Hobson, who piloted the collier *Merrimac* through a hail of shells in a daring attempt to sink a Spanish warship in the mouth of Santiago Harbor and thus trap the Spanish fleet?”³

Elbert Hubbard was silent, as his son went on to assert that none of those men were the heroes of the war. The real hero of the war, he contended, was U.S. Army 1st Lieutenant Andrew S. Rowan, who had carried a crucial message from President William McKinley to General Calixto García of the Cuban Revolutionary Army several weeks before war was declared. Later than

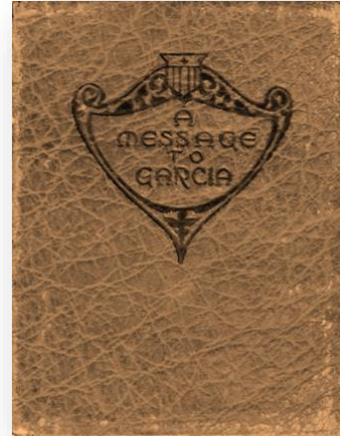
¹ *The Philistine*, March 1, 1899, Hathi Trust Digital Library, Hahitrust.org, accessed March 2021, 109–116. Elbert Hubbard was born in 1859 in Bloomington, Illinois, and never received more than a grade-school education. A self-made person in many respects, Hubbard filled in the gaps in his knowledge through voracious reading, a passion which became manifest in the founding of the Roycroft Shop, a publishing house specializing in deluxe bindings. He wrote a series of 182 biographies under the series title Little Journeys to Homes of the Great and also published two magazines, *The Philistine* and *The Fra* producing much of the content himself. Elbert Hubbard and his wife, Alice, were traveling to England on the *Lusitania* and went down with the ship when it was struck by a German torpedo on May 7th, 1915. monthly issues of *The Philistine* magazine from December 1913 to May 1914. The magazines were printed for the Society of the Philistines and published by them monthly. The Society of the Philistines was an association of book lovers and folks who write and paint. It was organized to further good fellowship among men and women who believed in allowing the widest liberty to individuality in thought and expression. Such notable authors as Elbert Hubbard, Stephen Crane, John Langdon Heaton, Edward Carpenter, Leo Tolstoy, and a myriad of other contributing writers. (*The Philistine: A Periodical of Protest*, December 1913 to May 1914, Kessinger Publishing, 2010, 438 pages).

² Alice Payne Hackett and James Henry Burke, *80 Years of Best Sellers 1895–1975*, New York, Bowker, 1977.

³ Thomas Fleming, “Getting the Real Message to Garcia,” *Military History Quarterly*, Winter 2007.

evening Elbert Hubbard wrote the article “in a single hour,” and recounts the discussion with his son.⁴ He notes that the article is but a “literary trifle” and that his son was correct about the hero of the war: Lieutenant Rowan was that hero because he did more than carry a message to García. Rowan was an example to society because he demonstrated something woefully lacking in too many people.

Hubbard wrote the account of how, in 1898, President McKinley wanted to recruit Cuban rebels to fight for the American cause. Spain ruled Cuba at the time, so recruiting those rebels would have been a valuable military asset. The President asked military leaders to contact a rebel leader named Calixto Garcia, who was somewhere in the mountain strongholds of Cuba—no one knew where. No mail or telegraph could reach him, but the President believed the need was dire to secure Garcia’s co-operation, and quickly. Adding to the difficulty was what seemed an impossibility: getting an American soldier through Cuba on the eve of war, especially when no one knew where Garcia could even be found.



Colonel Arthur L. Wagner was in charge of finding a person to deliver the message to Garcia. He knew Lt. Andrew Rowan and summoned him. Rowan never asked what the message was, or why it was important to be delivered, nor did he ask how to find Garcia in Cuba. He sealed the letter from the President in an oil-skin pouch and strapped it over his heart. Four days later, he landed by night off the coast of Cuba from an open boat, disappeared into the jungle, and in three weeks came out on the other side of the island, having traversed a hostile country on foot, and successfully delivering his letter to Garcia.



Lt. Andrew Summers Rowan

That was the story Hubbard told in his article, but only part of it was historically accurate (see Addendum). There has been no lack of criticism from military and other historians about the inaccuracies.

The story, however, was more than of historical interest to people then, and today. Hubbard simply used a dramatized version of a daring escapade performed by an American soldier to convey lessons about character.

⁴ Elbert Hubbard, *A Message to García* (1899). Reprinted in *Annals of America*, Vol. 12, 1895–1904, Populism, Imperialism, and Reform, 309–311.

THE MESSAGE OF THE MESSAGE

The message of *A Message to Garcia* is a story about the power of initiative and the importance of committing to taking personal responsibility for one's life and work, and asks the reader to apply Rowan's attitude to his or her own life as an avenue to success.

It was Hubbard's position that the world needed more Rowans, and that struck a social nerve because it called for people to exercise the moral courage to do the right thing when no one is looking, to demand more of themselves than others demand of them, to care more than others think is necessary, and to hold themselves accountable for delivering results. The message should still be striking a social nerve so it should be no surprise that the ideas Hubbard expressed clearly correspond with the philosophies of Freemasonry.⁵

Hubbard laments the shameful lack of people like Lieutenant Rowan—a person willing to take on responsibilities and see them through to the end; a person who did not need someone to look over his shoulders to keep him on track to get the job done, done right, and exhibit willingness to perform a requisite task despite obstacles. His story highlighted and voiced the value of individual initiative, perseverance, and conscientiousness in any task.

The phrase “to carry a message to Garcia” soon became common shorthand for resolutely fulfilling any difficult task and taking the initiative when carrying out a difficult assignment.⁶ The extra ordinary wide distribution of Hubbard's article is a powerful testimony to the importance of diligence. He asks in the writing, “What is Initiative?” and he tell us: “[It] is doing the right thing without being told. But next to doing the thing without being told is to do it when you are told once.”⁷

His position may also have been grounds for what has become an adage attributed to him: “One machine can do the work of fifty ordinary men. No machine can do the work of one extraordinary man.”⁸

A Message to Garcia is about our values, and virtues and how it is those tenets that guide our choices when we face the conditions that surround us. The message is simply conveyed against the backdrop of world circumstances in 1898. This same deeper message is found when examined against the backdrop of the ritual, lectures, and lessons of Freemasonry.

There is also another message, one perhaps that is best presented as a question, “What can I contribute so that others may succeed?” That too is a message that men find inside of Masonic philosophies—if they bother to look for it.

Service to others, when guided by the values and virtues we embrace, and when accompanied by the attitude and the view that such acts are performed selflessly for others, is not only a worthy

⁵ There is no record found to suggest neither Elbert Hubbard nor Andrew Rowan were Freemasons.

⁶ Charles Earle Funk, *A Hog on Ice & Other Curious Expressions*, New York, Harper Colophon, 1985,100.

⁷ Elbert Hubbard, *A Message to Garcia* (1899). Reprinted in *Annals of America*, Vol. 12, 1895–1904, Populism, Imperialism, and Reform, 309–311.

⁸ Elbert Hubbard, *The Roycroft Dictionary and Book of Epigrams*, East Aura, New York, 1923.

endeavor, but furnishes evidence of our transformation to better men. Properly grounded, good works are the fruit of creating better men.

This has nothing to do with financial philanthropy. While an important aspect, it is often found to be the route adopted by too many as an alternative to replace the dimensions of the real work of self-improvement.

Self-improvement through Freemasonry has to do with actually working on becoming more tolerant, cultivating friendships, practicing kindness through our actions and behavior toward all others, incorporating a habit of fair-mindedness in our thinking and to exemplify those things by the words we choose to speak and the way a Mason acts. The example of the person who takes the initiative and strives daily to polish those aspects of their behavior (their ashlar, if you will) is what ultimately strikes social nerves and attracts the attention of others who may seek to follow that example. That is precisely one of the many aims and purposes of the idea of Freemasonry, and that is how Freemasonry was designed to improve the world.

Every member admitted into the ranks of fraternity has the freedom of a choice. The fraternity has always been, and continues to be, ripe for their constructive actions and contributions.

Those admitted may become involved in that laudable pursuit by immersing themselves in the value of not only learning about the idea of Freemasonry and seeking ways to practice its philosophies in their lives, thereby becoming an example to others. The other choice is to be admitted and remain only a member of a fraternity where too many confuse membership alone as being a real Freemason.

Men who choose the first path can be the example and lead from any position. One does not have to be an elected or appointed official in the fraternity to do so. Leadership is a behavior—not a position.

As Hubbard asked, Are you a Rowan? When asked to carry out a task or charge, do you deliver? Do you do more than expected? Or are you a non-Rowan with a litany of excuses?

The world and the Institution of Freemasonry cries out for such men. They are needed and needed badly—men who will carry a message to Garcia.

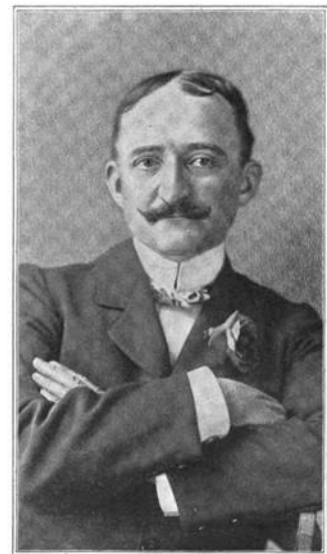
ADDENDUM

Hubbard's article got most of the historical part of his story wrong. In fact, Rowan, wrote a book in 1922 about the escapade that set correct the military history behind the article Hubbard wrote, and many other official War Department documents confirm Rowan's account. No matter, *A Message to Garcia* is about our values and virtues and how it is those tenets that guide our choices when we face the conditions that surround us. The message is simply conveyed against the backdrop of world circumstances in 1898.

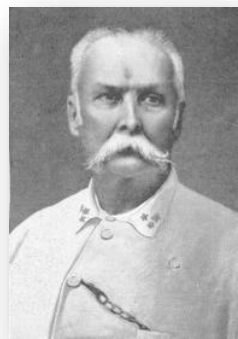
Lieutenant Andrew S. Rowan was not some "fellow" that a presidential aide picked out of a hat to contact the Cuban rebel general. The West Virginian was a forty-one-year-old West Point graduate, class of 1881, and a veteran intelligence officer. He had already served with distinction in Canada and Central America and had written a book on Cuba in 1897—a careful description of the island's topography. As a military attaché in Chile, he had learned Spanish. G.J.A. O'Toole, in a book about U.S. intelligence efforts, described him as "a wiry, compactly built man, with a mobile countenance, swarthy skin and a stubby black military mustache."⁹

When war was declared against Spain, the War Department decided to send an agent to General Garcia, to ascertain what cooperation might be expected from the insurgents, in case the United States should invade Cuba.

Major Arthur L. Wagner, head of the Military Information Division, successfully petitioned Adjutant General Henry Clark Corbin for permission to send spies to Cuba and Puerto Rico to gather military information prior to and during the Spanish American War. Wagner selected forty-year-old 1st Lt. Andrew S. Rowan to join Gen. Calixto García, commander of the rebel forces in eastern Cuba. On April 9, 1898, Rowan, posing as a civilian, boarded a steamer in New York bound for Kingston, Jamaica. With the help of the U.S. consul in Kingston, he connected with the Cuban Revolutionary Junta, some of whose members transported him by open boat during one of their trips to the southeastern coast of Cuba. They went ashore the morning of April 25.



LIEUTENANT-COLONEL ANDREW S. ROWAN.
From a photograph taken especially for McClure's Magazine by
Frances B. Johnston.



Major General
Calixto Ramón García

Following an eight-day horseback journey with rebels through the Sierra Maestra Mountains, Rowan met with García in the city of Bayamo on May 1. Rowan's assignment was to keep the War Department informed as to "the strength, efficiency, movements and general military situation." His orders were to stay in Cuba, to "accompany the Insurgent Forces, and to send back dispatches." Disregarding his orders, Rowan said he was there to gather information regarding García's needs in order to cooperate with the U.S. armed forces during a possible invasion. He added that he was eager to return to the U.S. García, seeing an opportunity, sent him back to the U.S. within hours of his arrival. Traveling with him were members of García's staff to confer with U.S. officials. After a five-day horseback journey to Manatí Bay on Cuba's north coast they "drew a little cockle-shell of a boat from under a mangrove bush" and set sail for Florida. A passing sponging steamer carried them to Nassau, and from there they eventually sailed to Tampa, arriving on May 13.

Rowan had no sooner landed in Cuba on April 25 than details of his secret mission were splashed across the pages of America's newspapers. It was learned that, while in Jamaica, Rowan had revealed this information to Elmer Roberts, an Associated Press correspondent. This was not what General Corbin anticipated. Had the news reports not made Rowan a popular hero, however falsely, Corbin might have had him court-martialed. Instead he was deemed as

⁹ Thomas Fleming, "Getting the Real Message to Garcia," *Military History Quarterly*, Winter 2007.

popular as Buffalo Bill and lauded by Major Gen Nelson A. Miles, the General of the Army, and temporarily promoted to lieutenant-colonel in the 6th Regiment Volunteer Infantry.

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