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MORE LIGHT ON THE FIRST DEGREE

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There is a moment of dramatic intensity in the ceremony of the first degree. The candidate in utter darkness, in an attitude of humility declares that the predominant wish of his heart is to see light. To the accompaniment of the sonorous phrases and majestic imagery of the opening words of Genesis the candidate is prepared for the sudden and dazzling revelation of light and the dissipation as in a thunderclap, of the darkness which had hitherto enveloped him.

Thought instructed in the following charges on the great and lesser lights of Freemasonry and in much of the symbolism surrounding him, the limitations of human perception are such that for the time being the candidate remains bewildered. As he is privileged to witness and participate in subsequent ceremonies however, his enlightenment increases and in the course of time he acquires that modicum of knowledge about Freemasonry which characterises the average Freemason, whose library on the subject consists of the ritual and little else, and whose activities in the pursuit of Masonic knowledge rarely extend beyond a more or less regular attendance at the working of degrees and occasionally, if there be no candidate offering, hearing as it were somewhat accidentally, an occasional lecture.

Few will deny that there is much in the ritual which in the absence of some study or research is and will remain obscure.

The purpose of this address is to discuss some of these obscurities, as they appear in the first degree, and thereby shed if I can, a little more light upon the meaning and teachings of the science. The main limitation upon my endeavour in this purpose is of course my own comparative inexperience in Masonry. I cannot hope to say much which will be instructive to many of the senior brethren present. I shall be satisfied if they find my presentation of the subject of some interest. Younger Masons I hope however, may this evening increase the sum of their Masonic knowledge.

It will be understood that I do not propose to present a closely connected theme and I must be excused if my remarks appear at times to be somewhat scrappy. The nature of my subject scarcely admits of any other treatment.

To study our ritual and its symbolism is to realise more and more that our order in its essence if not in its present constitution is of immemorial antiquity while its teachings cover the whole range of human philosophy.

Confining our attention to the first degree only, we are informed that it symbolises the entrance of all men upon this, their mortal existence.

The candidate is prepared for the ceremony in a peculiar way. The reasons are later explained to him. One could add much to that lecture if time permitted, but a few comments on this portion of the ceremony may be of interest.

The initiate is divested of all m . . . The usual m . . . reasons for this are familiar to all present. In all ages m . . . has been a symbol of impurity, or witchery, and superstition concerning it has persisted in a remarkable manner (much the same as the superstition of "touching wood") Some, of us still turn over our money when the new moon is first seen. In certain African tribes all m . . . are removed at the tribal ceremony of purification. Likewise the W.M. informs the candidate that had he any m . . . about him the ceremony thus far would have had to be repeated, the initiate being as it were ceremoniously unclean.

The H___w___ and the lack of m . . ., together symbolise the two states of helplessness and indigence. The candidate in this state, after a peremptory warning at the entrance is led stumbling in a slipshod state whither he knows not. He only knows that having expressed his faith in God he has been encouraged to accompany his guide with a firm but humble confidence. He is as helpless as, and somewhat more ridiculous in appearance than a new-born babe. If he has the means of bringing aid he must be thrust out into the utter darkness from whence he came. If the candidate has already been properly prepared in his heart this peculiar moment of helplessness and destitution cannot fail to make its impression. It may lead him to see new meaning in the Biblical statement, "Ye must be born again." it is or should be felt all time a signal cure for arrogance and pride and at the same time be a constant reminder of our duty to be thankful to the G.A.O.T.U. for such blessings as may come our way.

The candidate in this time of helplessness and comfortless indigence takes comfort in the knowledge that all others present have survived the same trial; that he is in this way becoming identified with them in the fraternity through a common experience. Thus is borne in upon his mind the salutary lesson of natural equality or as we express it sometimes, the meeting on the level. The first person seen by the candidate on first receiving the light is the W.M., not enthroned but on the same level.

If this lesson could be taught and acted on in the world to-day, peace would be everlasting. What causes wars but the desire in some to dominate others, and the renunciation of the principles of natural equality? This teaching does not abrogate ambition in the sense of making the best and most effective use of these natural qualities and talents with which we have been endowed. Freemasonry will always seek to reward merit and encourage industry. But when those who secure advancement through their own merit or through fortuitous circumstances, forget that we are all sprung from the same stock and are, par-takers of the same hope, and replace a becoming humility by arrogance and pride, then are such people the enemies of the great human family and the potential wreckers of peace and goodwill among men.

The candidate discovers that on his entry and during his perambulation he carried a r—n— round his neck. The cable tow is an interesting and important symbol. The derivation of the word is obscure, being either from the Hebrew or Dutch. It is clear, however, that the cord has been used from ancient times in many parts of the world to indicate the making of a pledge.

To the Masonic student 1 Kings chap. 2 verses 10 to 33 is an intensely interesting passage of scripture. What were the "ropes upon their heads" but the ancient counterpart of the cable tow? What did the King mean by "He is my brother" unless he meant a brother in a fraternity such as our own? What did the men "diligently observe" and "hastily catch" if not a sign? Why did the King treat Benhadad with such magnanimity if not because he was bound to do so by some mystic tie?

The cable tow is the outward resemblance of a vow or obligation. The reference to the length of the c—t— in the ob— of the 3rd degree is a reference to the strength of purpose and character and the extent of the charitable endeavours of the brother taking the ob—. The length of the c—t— of some brethren is greater than that of others, according to the degree with which they show forth and put into practice the truly Masonic virtues. Many scholars see in the c—t— a symbolical reference to the umbilical cord which unites the new born babe with its mother. The newly born Mason is similarly bound by the physical tie, but once obligated, and shown the light, the c—t— is removed and the brother then becomes bound by an even stronger bond, the mystic tie, that binds all Masons in the bond and fraternity of brotherly love, relief and truth, just as the physical cord when severed at birth is replaced by the greater and stronger bond between mother and child, which survives all hardships and trials— the bond of maternal love and filial devotion.

The c—t— has two ends, and its implications are reciprocal. It signifies the vow of the brother binding him to be true and faithful to his lodge. But it is also a promise that he may always look to his brethren for comfort and support in the hour of trouble. Looked at this way the c—t— becomes one of the very fundamentals of Masonry and whenever seen in the Lodge should be an instant reminder to every brother both of his great and invaluable privileges as a Mason and also of his obligations and responsibilities towards his brethren.

The r.h. being made s—s— deserves passing reference. A further passage of scripture to those referred to in Scripture is of interest, namely .Deuteronomy chap. 25, verses 7-10

The ritual informs us that the rite refers to the ancient custom at the ratification of a bargain. This does not wholly explain why in our ceremony the r.h. is s.s. throughout the whole ceremony and not merely during the time the obligation is being entered into. There is an old Scotch custom for the bridegroom to loosen one shoe string and leave it in this state throughout the marriage ceremony. Thos. Pennant in his "Tour of Scotland" mentions a wedding in Skye in 1772 where he observed with astonishment that at one wedding "the bridegroom put all the powers of magic to defiance for he was married with both shoes tied with their latchet."

In Greece and Rome the removal of one shoe took place certain solemn rites or at times of danger. Perseus is said to have worn one shoe when he decapitated the Gorgon. An ancient Greek vase depicting a ritual of purification shows the subject divested of one shoe.

It would thus appear that in addition to the signification given in the ritual to the r.h. being s.s. it might be added that this rite or the similar rite of the removal of a shoe is suggestive firstly of purification, the initiate being freed from every passion and being fitted only for the reception of truth and wisdom, and secondly of the sincerity of the initiate in his vow or obligation.

There is much hidden in the irregular steps, stepping off with the l.f. .The irregular steps refer to the groping in darkness for the entrance from chaos to light. The use of the left foot, according to Churchward, is an allusion to the manner of the destruction of Apap the legendary serpent of Evil of ancient Egypt by Hermes— the victory of morning light over the horror of darkness, of good over evil, of knowledge over ignorance. Unless we believe in these inevitable results of all human strivings assisted by the light which is from above, life becomes futile, and all effort meaningless.

In all representations of this ancient encounter the God Hermes has his left foot advanced or planted on the monster. Similarly in the Book of the Dead the ritual relating to the Egyptian mysteries, the soul of the deceased is always represented as meeting its obstacles with the l.f. advanced. It is of course well known that our ceremonies perpetuate much that found place in the ancient Egyptian mysteries. Dr. Churchyard gives the following account of the initiation into the Egyptian mysteries. Brethren will not fail to note certain similarities with our own : —

"The Egyptian initiatory ceremony was conducted with great care. The Candidates were divested of most of their clothing and a chain or rope of some kind was placed round their neck, to signify their belief in God, their dependence on Him, and their solemn obligations to submit and devote themselves to His will and service. The fact that they were neither naked nor clothed was an emblem of their untutored and unregenerate nature, and destitute of any knowledge of the true God. The Candidate was blindfolded so that in this condition the chain or rope was a symbol that the Candidate was being led from darkness to light, from ignorance to a knowledge of the one true and living God. He was then led by a Brother to the door of the temple or Lodge which appeared as a blank wall. Arriving at this door he asked for admittance and was asked by the 'Watcher,' who he was. His answer translated from the Egyptian was, 'The Kneeler.' He was then given a password which in Egyptian is Ra-gririt. The door was an equilateral triangle, a symbol typical of Heaven. The square on which he trod as he passed through was a symbol typical of earth; the whole entrance symbolized passing from Earth to Heaven. The Candidate was conducted through long passages where he had to answer various questions, words of 'power and might' being given him. Finally he was conducted to the centre of the lodge and asked what he most desired; his answer was that light might be given him."

If a candidate turned back or violated his obligation his throat was taut and his head chopped off, so that he would be dismembered and speechless before the judgment.

In other ways we find the left regarded as being aggressive and (by an interesting deterioration in its original significance) offensive or unpleasant. The Latin word for left is "sinister," now a completely Anglicised word of repellent significance. Even "the Left Wing" when used in a political sense is one of opprobrium rather than praise and is commonly used by critics and not by supporters.

By contrast the right indicates peace. The right aria is uncovered to give an assurance of this character. A Mohommaden on entering ca "Temple advances the r.f. to show he comes in peace; and other examples might be cited of similar practices among certain coloured races.

Lectures have recently been given by learned brethren in this Lodge on the rite of circumambulation amid also on the Pillars. It would be presumption for me to attempt to add to what they have said with regard to these subjects. A proper understanding of what is implied in the constant and repeated circuit from East to West by the south is necessary before a brother can lay claim to a full appreciation of the teaching of this degree.

So far as I am aware no recent discussion has occurred here on the n.e. corner and part of the time left to me may I think be profitably employed in reference to its significance. This corner is midway between North, the place of darkness, and East, the place of Light. This is the position of an apprentice who has emerged from the state of ignorance and is pressing forward in the pursuit of enlightenment. He is still a rough ashlar and only time will show whether he will ultimately become a polished stone standing four square upon an even base, perfect in its parts and honourable to the builder. The candidate has nothing to recommend him in material possessions but his garb is one of humility. Yet he has his faith in God and is on the road of High Purpose. He is to all appearances, just and upright, fit and ready to lay a true and firm foundation. Repeated trials and probations lie ahead of him but a determination to surmount these difficulties as they arise from time to time will impart the fine polish to his character, induce the habit of virtue, enlighten the mind and purify the soul.

Scholars have sought out reasons why the n.e. corner should be selected as the location for this important lesson. Here the thread of mysticism and link with antiquity running through Masonry is evident once again. Albert Pike points out that the Apprentice represents the Aryan race in its original home on the highlands of Pamir on the north of that Asia termed Orient at an angle whence upon two great lines of emigration S. and W. they flowed forth in successive waves to conquer and colonise the world. In Northern latitudes the sun at the summer solstice rises in the N.E. and according to Egyptian mythology the sun rose in this quarter on the day of its creation. Thus the N.E. corner in ancient times acquired peculiar sanctity. Then at the erection of an ancient building it was a practice to offer human sacrifice by building a workman into the structure at the n.e. corner so that the building might become identified with his strength and spirit—a cruel custom in cruel times but the law of sacrifice is found in all ages in one form or another. In our own times it is customary to put coins and sometimes wine and oil or corn beneath a foundation stone and this is a survival of the same practice and may be assumed to have been originally intended to minister to the comfort of the unfortunate ghost of the cornerstone. Since the introduction of printing, newspapers have been added to the deposits. In favour of those who have made such use of newspapers it should in charity be assumed that they were left to supply to those who might in later years come upon the deposits, some information of current happenings at the date of the erection of the building, and not to provide light reading for such ghostly wraiths of those who in past ages were sacrificed at the n.e. corners of buildings and as may still seek a final resting-place.

Archaeologists in the course of their investigations have located the foundations of many ancient temples in Arabia, Syria and other countries of the near East. The superstructure of most of these ancient edifices has been wholly or partially demolished. Many of these stones which formerly formed part of these ancient structures has been found built into more modern and less substantial buildings.

Our ritual is like that. Much of it is a recent compilation, historically speaking. Yet built into the ritual and established procedure of the Masonic ceremonies we find evidences of much greater antiquity. Though freemasonry as at present constituted may not go back for more than two centuries, its teachings and precept; and much of its ceremonial procedure take their rise in the Middle Ages running back to the dawn of history.

Shall we briefly consider some of these ancient stones which we can detect in the Masonic superstructure as we all know it to-day?

The Tyler's duties inter alia are to keep off all "Cowans." This, even in ancient times, was a slang and sometimes vulgar word. The original Latin derivation is *colis* — a stalk. The word deteriorated during the Roman occupation of Gaul (now France) and became "couille" a word of almost obscene meaning. Thus couillon in old French came to mean a vagabond or indecent person — a poltroon. There have been periods in history when the French and Scotch had more to do with each other than was good for England and we find this errant word figuring as a slang word in Scotland as "cowan." It is found indeed in Masonic records late in the Sixteenth century. In Scotland the word "cowan" is still found but it now means a man who built without mortar, suggestive of one not fully or properly apprenticed. Masonically, it means an irregular mason—a mason "without the word," a class distinguished from intruders who are strangers or interlopers.

Then we have the expression S.M.I.B. Mote was in general use in the Anglo Saxon and early Norman era, the A.S. derivation being "mot" and meaning "must." The word is not in the authorised version of the Bible. The phrase is of course now merely an equivalent of "Amen."

It is said that the word "accepted" in the phrase A.F. and A. Mason relates to the days when there were Operative Guilds, particularly I suppose during the Cathedral building era when these Guilds and operative lodges were societies of some importance. For various reasons people not trained as operative masons sought admittance to the company of these skilled artisans and such persons were more and more granted membership. Though not operatives they were "accepted" masons.

The word "hele" is of interest and also has an A.S. origin in the verb "helan" to conceal or cover up and later to cover in. Thus in some counties in England people still "hele" or thatch a house. A.S. scholars generally agree on the pronunciation as hele rather than hal. There is a difference in practice among Lodges on this point.

"Candid" - This word preserves in the ritual its archaic significance of "free from blame" which differs considerably from the modern meaning of the word.

It is of interest to note the orders of architecture referred to in the Ritual.

The one order which in the last three hundred years has been the most pre-eminent, the most universal and the most beautiful is the Gothic, but it is not mentioned. The rise of the Gothic style synchronised with the emergence of Northern Europe from the Dark Ages. Masons found that the styles of architecture which had served for centuries in Greece, Rome and the borders of the Mediterranean did not serve in Germany, England and similar latitudes. Flat roofs and towers did not shed snow which in such places threatened to impose heavy stresses on the buildings. Thus was the Gothic style devised with its steeply sloping spires. It became so widely used in designs and forms of such intricate and spiritual beauty that it acquired the description of "frozen beauty." It was called Gothic by the Latin people in contempt because it originated in northern latitudes which were peopled by the Goths and Huns, rough uncouth folk who had never previously been known to produce anything of beauty. The significance of the total omission of any reference to Gothic architecture in our Ritual is I think that the charges were composed and established in much their present form before the Gothic style became known. If this is right, we have in this fact further interesting evidence of the great antiquity of the ritual and the form of our Masonic ceremonies.

These desultory observations, though disconnected in themselves, will together, I hope, serve to throw some light on the historicity and symbolism of the Ceremony of the First Degree. Much more could be said on the subject but with a view to keeping my remarks with a reasonable compass I have deliberately left untouched such subjects as the working tools, the tracing board, the pillars, the officers of the Lodge and other matters of interest. A study of any of these subjects would alone furnish material for a lecture.

Joseph Fort Newton has described Masonry as "moral poetry uniting the basic truths of faith with the tasks and duties of every day seeking to build men and make them workmen in the service of fraternal righteousness."

In times when vicious but powerful men seem determined to turn civilisation into a shambles and ruthlessly stamp out all that stands for freedom, for faith in things ternal, for mental and spiritual culture, masonry is a sheet anchor in the plethora of class materialism; the reason is that having faith in the G.A.O.T.U. whose Glory is declared by the heavens and whose hand-work is shown by the firmament, we need not fear that the gland principles on which we stand, Brotherly Love, Belief and Truth, most ultimately survive this passing era of iconoclasm and thus may Masons and all men similarly minded look forward in hopeful expectancy to the establishment of the new order when

"The war drums throb no longer
And the battle flags are furled
In the Parliament of Man
The Federation of the World."