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## THE APRON

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In choosing a subject for my address this evening I have been influenced very largely by two very pronounced facts—viz., the importance placed in our Ritual on the Apron, and the paucity of space devoted to it, alike in the Ritual and in Lodge gatherings generally. Not that stores of information are lacking in our Masonic writings—far from it—but beyond two pages in the First Degree and four lines in the Second, and another four in the Third, the Ritual is silent—silent on a subject of such vital importance. This is the more thought-provoking when we remember that the Apron is the one imperative, distinguishing badge without which no one may enter a Masonic Lodge.

That there is some need for instruction on the Apron is demonstrated by my own experience, for during some 17 years' active attendance, I have not, in my own or any other Lodge, heard one word relative to its history and symbolic meaning, apart from those embodied in the investitures of the three Degrees.

In bringing to you this evening this study of our Ancient and Honourable Symbol "The Apron," I frankly and freely confess that nothing of originality can be claimed, for my very ignorance has forced me to delve, into others' stores of knowledge and from thence bring you a simple statement of the Claims, Importance, Historic Evolution and Symbolism of our Badge.

Gratefully I acknowledge my indebtedness to many writers, particularly M. P. Hall, W. H. Wilmshurst, Past Assistant G.D.C., England, N.S.W. Craftsmen, and most particularly Very Wor. Rev. Bro. David Calder, P.G.C. Wellington, from whose lectures I have copied copiously. From others' findings, this is just a simple setting out of our teaching in such terms as may be helpful not only to a Lodge of Research but to the Craft in general.

If as V.W. Bro. Calder says, "the work of compilation has been a gathering of nectar," then I, who only retell others' findings, have found the work of compiling this address an altogether delightful study and an enlightenment and advance in Masonic knowledge. May I hope that my effort will bring to you also knowledge, help and inspiration.

### CLAIMS.

First of all recorded articles of apparel worn on the human frame, from the elaborate Egyptian priesthood to the gee-string of an African native, in every age and almost every tribe the Apron has found its place alike as a covering of modesty, a protection of the body and clothing, an ornament, and an insignia of rank and office.

In Freemasonry no symbol has such pride of place, nor are higher claims made for any other. It is the Distinguishing Badge of the Freemason. It is the imperative token of admission. It is the Badge of Innocence—the Bond of Friendship.

"It is more Ancient than the Golden Fleece or Roman Eagle."

"It is more Honourable than the Garter or any other order."

Great claims, these, when we remember the mythical lustre clinging to these vaunted orders of knighthood and chivalry.

A glance at these old orders may clear our thoughts of any misconception of what they actually were.

#### THE GOLDEN FLEECE.

In Greek mythology there runs a legend of Jason and a band of heroes who voyaged far to fetch back the Golden Fleece. Briefly the story is that Jason's two cousins, Phrixus and Hellen, having been sentenced to sacrifice to prevent crop failure, their mother's ghost appeared with a ram with a golden fleece on which they endeavoured to escape. Hellen fell off and was drowned while crossing the Straits of Istanbul—hence the name Hellespont. Phrixus succeeded in escaping, sacrificed the ram, and hung up the golden fleece guarded by a dragon. It was the quest of this Golden Fleece that became the foundation of a wonderfully adventurous voyage. Ancient indeed is the Legend of the Golden Fleece; but I could find no record of any "Order" or "Institution" of the Golden Fleece in Greece. Indeed, only from the point of antiquity can the story have any bearing on Freemasonry.

There is, however, a Masonic school of thought that the reference in the Ritual is to that knightly and chivalrous order instituted by Philip the Good in Spain on January 10th, 1429, and named by him "The Order of the Golden Fleece." This order, with all the embellishments of kingly pomp, consisted of the Sovereign and 24 knights. But its functions were purely as King's Counsellors, with whom he discussed war and chivalrous deeds.

#### THE ROMAN EAGLE.

The reference to the Roman Eagle is, of course, to the emblem used by the old Roman Emperors, as or on their army standards. As this dates from about 100 B.C., its antiquity is not very great.

#### EUROPEAN ORDERS.

There is, however, another school of thought on the reference intended by the Ritual to these orders.

While English Freemasonry was consolidating in the mid-centuries and the Ritual was forming, there were two other Freemason bodies in Northern Europe both challenging the English Lodge for supremacy and antiquity. In Flanders the Flemish Freemasons had adopted the title of the "Golden Fleece," while the German Lodge had taken for their title the "Roman Eagle." Some writers therefore maintain that the Ritual reference was a distinct gibe at the European opponents.

#### THE GARTER.

The Order of the Garter of St. George was instituted in the fourteenth century. The year is not very certain, but between 1344 and 1351. This order consisted of the Sovereign King and 25 knights, and had no loftier aim at its inception than a company for competition at jousts or tilting matches. No change in its numbers was made till 1786, when the sons of King George III. were made eligible. In 1805 the lineal descendants of George II. were declared in, and in 1831 those also of George I. were added. From almost its inception women have been admitted as "Dames de la Fraternite St. George." The official colour of the Order was pale or sky blue. This fact is worth noting, as it bears a distinct influence on our Craft.

#### THE THISTLE.

While speaking of the Order of the Garter, reference should also be made to the "Order of the Thistle." Founded in Scotland in 1687 by King James II., this institution, dedicated to St. Andrew, was a counter to the English "Garter." The membership was restricted to the Sovereign and eight "Knights Companions," increased to 12 in 1703 and to 16 in 1827. The official insignia of the Order was a Collar of Thistles, alternating with sprigs of Rue, and the official colour was green.

Big claims, therefore, are these made for an Apron which, when presented to the initiate is, or ought to be, a piece of plain white leather.

Big claims when we think of the rich and gorgeous insignia of the many orders of chivalry and kingly worth, and of priestly eminence; and that this piece of plain white leather shall take precedence of all other worldly insignia as being "more honourable" as well as "more ancient."

Remember that these claims are made when the Apron is first presented to the initiate—without the embellishments belonging to the higher ranks of the Craft.

It is of plain white lambskin when it is first given to the initiate, and as such in its simplicity it is, placed upon his coffin when, having completed a life to which, it may be, great honours have come, his mortal remains are consigned to their last resting place.

As the outstanding Badge of the institution, the Apron recalls the splendid Brotherhood that is ours, our teachings of the highest and finest moral standards, the acknowledgment of our dependence upon the Deity, and our works of charity and love.

It is because of the actual exemplification of these virtues that the Craft occupies its supreme place in the minds of so many worthy men.

As to age, the Apron was a form of covering for the body from earliest recorded history. Take the Biblical story either as history or tradition, the fact of the Apron's early symbolic use is established. It was the medium by which our first parents displayed their instinctive desire for modesty.

Ancient, therefore, the Apron undoubtedly is, and most honourable. It is the Badge of Modesty, or true Innocence (not ignorance). But it is also the Badge of belief in Toil, and this, for us, is its greatest value. Our Ritual wisely says it is to be worthily worn. To labour, even at the risk of soiling our garments, is both necessary and good. But to labour to the soiling of our inner character is bad. It is for this reason that labour in the service of our day and generation is the highest and best reason for existence. What in comparison were the original objects of most of those proud Orders of Knighthood and Chivalry? Jousting ! Sporting ! Fighting ! Any opportunity for members to assert their proud greatness as against that of men of lowly estate!

Fortunately the old spirit has changed. The knighthoods of to-day are for distinctive service, and in the majority of instances are worthy tributes to the beauty of labour and service.

#### HISTORIC EVOLUTION.

The history of the Apron and its evolution to its present condition is full of interest. In fact, a knowledge of the origin and history is essential to an understanding of its present-day appearance and symbolism. Although, as already stated, aprons have been used since earliest antiquity, the Masonic Apron is derived more directly from the apron as used by the mid-century cathedral builders. Many of their little regulations for its wearing have influenced alike the present-day shape and our Masonic usage.

As worn by those old Operative Masons the Apron was large enough to cover the whole body, being in fact the whole skin, minus only the head and tail. The neck portion gave a covering for the wearer's chest and was supported by a thong, or strap of leather, around his neck. The body of the skin formed the apron "skirt" and the legs the thongs to pass round his waist. These "waist-bands" were brought around and fastened in front with two end pieces or falls.

Very rigid rules of wear governed the distinctive grades of the old cathedral builders guilds. Thus the Apprentice wore the Apron with the neck-piece turned down and in behind the skirt; the Fellowcraft with the flap up, and the Master Mason with the flap down outside the skirt. It is suggested that these regulations may have governed only the non-working hours. Illustrating the persistence of custom, it is interesting to know that a local Masonic brother, an operative mason by trade, recalls having been severely reprimanded when as an apprentice he entered a room wearing his apron with the flap down over the front of the skirt, and was promptly ordered by the master masons to "fold that flap inside the skirt" till he was out of his apprenticeship.

#### SHAPE.

From the foregoing description it is easy to mark the speculative Freemasons' adoption and adoption to the Apron of to-day, namely, a rectangular white lambskin, with turned-down triangular flap. Originally the flap

was worn point upwards and all decorations were on the under-side. In early Lodges there was no universal pattern or colour. Each Lodge indulged its own taste in size, colour and ornamentation.

In 1813, the date of the union of the two Grand Lodges of England, the United Grand Lodge of England enforced standardisation and uniformity, and the Apron as worn to-day became, the standard both in material, shape, colour and ornamentation.

#### BORDER.

The origin of the border is interesting. The Aprons were at first of white leather, but the wearers, finding the rough under-side detrimental to their clothes, adopted the plan of lining the Apron with silk or other soft material to obviate this. The edges of this lining were in some instances turned over and showed on the front as a slight border or edging. This was deemed an improvement, the width gradually increased, and finally the border as we have it was adopted as part of the regulation Apron.

#### COLOUR.

In 1731, finding all sorts of colours in use, the Grand Lodge of England took action and gave instructions that the Apron worn by Grand Lodge officers should be white, lined or bordered with blue, the Grand Stewards white bordered with red, others white bordered with white.

The blue was defined as "Garter" blue—that was, the blue of the Stuart period—the pale blue so familiar to the present-day Masons. King George II. about that time changed the Garter blue to its present shade, the darker "Royal," to distinguish his Knights of the Garter from those created by the exiled Stuarts. The change was adopted also for Grand Lodge officers and persists to-day.

In 1813 the light shade was adopted for the Craft in general and as part of the Master Mason's Apron.

The Grand Lodge of Scotland uses green in its Grand Lodge regalia, derived from the colour of the Order of the Thistle. Scotland also adopted the semi-circular flap and left the choice of colour to the individual Craft Lodges. Therefore it is that some of them took special colours and some a tartan.

#### GAUNTLETS.

A word here on the Gauntlets is not out of place. They are simply a survival and adaptation of the "gauntlet gloves" worn by the Operative Masons, but separated for convenience and ornamented to designate the official from the Master Mason.

#### SYMBOLISM.

The historic evolution of the Apron is especially emphasised as that background is essential to a practical conception of its symbolism.

Looking at the Badge to-day we at once recognise it has been shortened and narrowed from its original size. It is now purely a symbol, and such as can be worn without discomfort with evening dress. Nevertheless, it had its origin in the Apron of the Operative, and as such we can best interpret its meaning to-day.

There have been many, and some fanciful, interpretations of its shape and colour, its corner angles and so on, all of which may apply, and do possibly appeal to some Masons; but these are a minor interest to us. We desire rather to learn reasonable meanings and gain practical ideas as a help in our personal character building.

#### SKIN.

It is significant that the Apron is of skin. As such it is the emblem of vicarious sacrifice, and of the death of the innocent that we might live thereby. It is of lambskin, and of old it was provided that the lamb "should be without blemish." To wear the Apron worthily is to imply a personal readiness to give oneself in true sacrificial service to one's brethren—to them in particular, and then to mankind in general.

The Apron is the symbol of innocence—not of ignorance; of modesty, and of purity; of toil, of service to others, and of a determination to keep oneself clean. In the words of the Sacred Volume:

"Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this—to visit the fatherless and widow in their affliction and to keep himself unspotted from the world."—Jas. 1:27.

It must not be supposed, however, that the Innocence symbolised by the lambskin implies ignorance of worldly things. Rather it suggests that with a full knowledge of the profane, the worthy wearer is still single-minded in his desire to serve. He voluntarily adopts the Badge of Purity and Innocence and Self-Sacrifice, and trusts that by wearing it worthily he may exemplify what it means to be a member of the Fraternity. To stand forth in one's own sight, in the eyes of our fellows, and finally in the sight of the Creator as a "living exposition of the principles of the Apron" is an honour above the power of the gift of any earthly potentate.

Yet this, brethren, is our bounden duty. Let us see that no one enters our Lodge as an initiate who is not already worthy and who does not give sure promise of continuing to exemplify our standards.

#### WHITE.

With all its changes the Apron is pre-eminently a Badge of Toil. It is white in colour partly because such is suitable for evening wear, but mostly because in Church symbolism of almost every age white has been the colour typifying Innocence and Purity. It is as such it was adapted by Freemasonry.

#### BLUE.

Outstanding is the colour blue for rosettes and borders. In Church symbolism blue is the colour of Hope.

#### ORNAMENTATION.

The custom of adorning the Apron arose apparently in the eighteenth century, and once started, the makers of regalia endeavoured to use every available bit of space. When in 1813 the Grand Lodge of England fixed the design, shape and colour, a much more simple emblem was instituted, simple yet dignified and full of meaning. Just the rectangle with triangular flap, and with blue and silver adornments.

#### FLAP.

The Ego—the ultimate Divine principle in man—is represented by the triangular flap of the Master Mason's Apron. The triangle, or pyramid form is the geometrical symbol for spirit or fire, and the ultimate spirit of man may be likened to a, pointed flame or tongue of fire. The word "pyramid" derives from the Greek word "pur"—fire.

#### TASSELS.

The tassels on the Apron give opportunity for very interesting research. They carry us back to the old operative days when the Apron was the entire skin of an animal. The thongs tied around the wearer's waist were brought to the front and the ends allowed to fall below the waistline. The ends so left hanging were then decorated with tassels or similar ornaments. The tassels themselves were at first in the centre, but were soon moved to either side to make room for any adornment that might be put in the centre. Substitute now for the leather thongs those of silk as now found on our Apron, and we arrive at our Apron in its shape to-day.

The tassels have seven strings. These represent the "seven liberal Arts and Sciences," namely, Grammar, Rhetoric, Logic, Arithmetic, Geometry, Music and Astronomy; also that "seven" essential to the perfection of the Lodge; and of many other "sevens" surrounding the perfect number.

To some the pendant ribbons with the seven chains ending in little balls become symbols of the two great pillars and recall the passage in 1 Kings 7 :17-18 telling how Solomon placed networkwork and pomegranates for their tops.

Others again see in the fringe an allusion to the veil that hung before the Holy of Holies.

Endless are the allegories drawn from the Apron—all interesting and helpful.

#### WAISTBAND.

The waistband now is fastened with a metal serpent—symbolic among the Egyptians of wisdom.

#### ROSETTES.

The explanation of the rosettes is a little more difficult. Indeed, only theories seem to exist as to their origin and present-day worth. This latter is undoubted. They indicate the wearer's rank as Apprentice, Fellow Craft or Master Mason. Some older Lodges have one rosette on the flap of the E.A.'s Apron.

#### TAUS.

The three "taus" on the Installed Master's Apron are most interesting. In oldest Hebrew character the "tau" was the letter of the alphabet similar to our T. Its shape in modern Hebrew is somewhat different, but originally it was a true cross—as is our T to-day. It was always a symbol of the Cross, and as such was used by Moses as the sign on the forehead of Aaron when consecrated to the high priesthood (Exodus 28-38). In Ezekiel 9:4 this symbol is used as the sign placed on the fore-head of those who were to be saved from the hand of the destroying Angel. Thus the "tau" is the sign of Consecration and Salvation. Such was the actual teaching of the ancient rabbis. It was a mark or sign of favourable distinction.

That the "tau" is inverted on the Apron seems to have come into use because of its similarity in shape to the level. As such it exemplified the two lines—the perpendicular and the horizontal. The perpendicular is the line of Divinity; the horizontal is the line of humanity. These two speak of Divinity and humanity, and when in perfect relation, as are the lines of the square and level, all must be well.

That the "tau" is triply displayed signifies that the wearer has brought his three lower natures—physical, emotional and mental—under complete control: that he has crucified them.

#### GRAND MASTER'S APRON.

The elaborate adornment of the Grand Master's Apron is a thing of beauty, but it has the sanction of most ancient custom. We have spoken of the Apron as going back to the earliest records of our first parents—this is in accord with Divine Writ. We also have the ancient carvings on rocks, and among these there is nothing more valuable or more beautiful than is to be found in the early Egyptian tombs. The picture records of the old tombs date back far beyond Moses. As one authority states :

"The Apron was the Badge of Authority in early Egypt and was worn by the King as head of the priesthood when performing religious ceremonies in the temple, and also as Grand Master when assisting at the initiatory rites in the Mysteries. On such occasions the Apron was looked upon as the **distinctive regalia** of his high office."

In the temples and tombs there are quite a number of drawings of Grand Masters' Aprons all bearing the solar emblem. We have only to add, therefore, that the desire to adorn our most distinguished Master has followed established custom. Thus we have the Sun, then the Ear of Corn, the Pomegranate and other such fruits of the earth as are made possible by the Grand Luminary of Nature. What more apparent to the ancient man of thought than that the sun was the Grand Master of the physical world, ushering in light and bringing warmth, beauty and pulsating life?

Wilmschurst draws this signification :

"The pale blue and silver of the Master Mason's Apron became intensified in the deep blue and gold ornamentation worn by the Grand Master and his officers, who in theory have evolved to still deeper spirituality and transmuted themselves from silver into fine gold."

"The King's daughter (the soul) is all glorious within, her clothing is of wrought gold," namely wrought or fabricated by her own spiritual progress. (Ps. 45:13).

Wilmschurst suggests the following very constructive thoughts from the Apron: —

"From what has already been stated the full significance of the Apron will now be perceived and may be summarised thus :

- "(1) The Apron is the symbol of the bodily vesture and condition of the soul, not so much of the temporal physical body as of its permanent invisible body which will survive the death of the mortal part.

- "(2) The soul fabricates or makes its own body or 'Apron' by its own desires, and thoughts (Gen. 3:7: 'They made themselves aprons') and as these are pure or impure so will that body be correspondingly transparent and white or dense and opaque.
- "(3) The investiture of the candidate with the Apron **in** each Degree by the S.W. as the W. Master's deputy for that purpose is meant to inculcate this truth, i.e.: For the S.W. represents the soul, which, in accordance with its own spirituality automatically clothes itself with its own **self-made** vesture in a way that marks its own progress or regress.
- "(4) The unadorned white of the First Degree indicates the purity of soul contemplated as being attained in that degree.
- "(5) The pale blue rosettes added in the Second Degree indicate that 'progress is being made in the science' of regeneration and that the candidate's spirituality is beginning to develop. Blue is the colour of the sky and is traditionally associated with devotion to spiritual concerns.
- "(6) In the Third Degree 'still further progress' is emblemized by the increased blue adornment of the Apron, as also by its silver tassels and the silver serpent used to fasten the Apron strings. In the First and Second Degrees no metal has appeared upon the Apron, the candidate theoretically divesting himself of all base metals and trans-muting them into spiritual riches. With Mastership he has attained an influx of those riches under the emblem of the tassels of silver, a colourless precious metal always associated with Soul, as gold by reason of its supreme value and warm colour is associated with Spirit. The silver serpent is the emblem of Divine wisdom, binding the soul's new-made vesture together."

Finally, brethren, as we have established the fact that the Apron is the Badge of Innocence in the finest sense of that beautiful word, may we press the point that it is the

#### BOND OF FRIENDSHIP.

Friendship comes because of the recognition of equality, even in the face of diversity of place, position and power. What finer thing to exemplify than that the Grand Master is a worker! He wears the Apron of Toil. In the brotherhood of service is truest service, says the word of the Man of Galilee.

"My Father worketh hitherto and I work." He who wore the carpenter's apron would show that we can, by our toil, be friends also of the Most High, as well as of one another. He elevated friendship when He said: "I have not called you servants, but friends" (John 15:15). Surely the highest appellation ever bestowed on man was when God called Abraham "My friend" (2 Chron. 20:7, James 2:23).

Friendship is possible only in an atmosphere of peace and concord. The teaching on the Apron is emphatic on this, as witness the words of the Wor. Master when he adds to the S.W.'s investiture in the First Degree :  
 "If unfortunately your differences are of such a nature as not to be so easily adjusted, it were better that one or both of you should retire than that the harmony of the Lodge should be disturbed by your presence."

In all our Masonic gatherings and individual contacts we should steadily endeavour to build friendships. The very fact that the other fellow wears an Apron is evidence, or should be, that he wants our friendship and is willing to meet half-way any advance we make. Friendships do spring spontaneously, but how rich is the mine of potential friendships in any Lodge or the Craft in general if we definitely go to work to secure friends.

In conclusion, let me add that possibly the finest inspirational lesson to be drawn from the Apron is from the blue border of our distinguishing Badge. This may well have been inspired by that passage in Numbers 15: 38-40. Moses, as you remember, had designed and erected that wonderful tabernacle—prototype and forerunner of K.S. Temple. But do you remember that according to Hebrews 8:5, "he made all things according to the pattern given him on the Mount." Every little detail—every knot of rope, every instruction to a workman, specialist though he may be—everything was according to Divine command. So then, by Divine command Moses ordered the Children of Israel to place upon the border of their garments

"A Ribband of Blue throughout all their generations . . . that ye may **remember** and **do** all my Commandments and be **holy unto your God.**"

Surely, brethren, here is the epitome of all the lessons of the Apron:

That we remember our solemn obligations, our oaths to be true to ourselves, true to our brethren, true to our God.

That we remember the glorious traditions and teachings of the Institution we love.

That we remember to **do!**— to toil as the Apron symbolizes.

That we remember that our Order is 'based on Brotherly Love, Relief, Truth and Friendship—Friendship as man with man, and Friendship as man with God our Father.

And mostly remember to be holy.

Every time we don the Apron, that border of blue that bands the whole symbolic Badge should speak with clear ringing accents; and as we link the silver serpent we should rejoice that we are "Girt about by an Apron."