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SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE SECOND DEGREE.

An Epilogue to the Explanation Lecture on the Second Degree Tracing Board.

An Address given by WBro J. Kinnear, PGSwdB, Member, in the Hawke's Bay Research Lodge No 305 on 3rd February 2003.

Worshipful Master and Brethren, there is not much in this paper, which is original. Most of it was sourced from a book of Selected Papers published by the United Masters' Lodge No 167 (Auckland), circa 1910. It was prepared and presented by myself, after a Second Degree working, in Lodge Scinde Centennial No 405, in 1984. I suppose you could say that it is a 1984 distillation of a 1910 vintage.

As sometimes happens, when enthusiasm runs riot, the epilogue seems to have become longer the lecture and the tail may have developed a tendency to wag the dog. However, I think that the *epilogue philosophy* compliments that of the *explanation lecture* and provides the candidate with food for thought, as he is exhorted to make a daily advancement in Masonic knowledge by making the hidden mysteries of nature and science his future study.

For the purpose of this paper, it is desirable to begin with the enunciation of the familiar proposition that Freemasonry is *a peculiar system of morality, veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols*. This system of morality is the essence of a universal fraternity whose real origin is veiled in the mists of antiquity and its true history, difficult to unravel from the tangled skein of accumulated tradition. The history of the world begins with legend – so does the history of Freemasonry.

Suffice to say that our *history* has been established, by diligent research, as far back as the earliest known lodges of the *operative masons' guilds* of the middle ages and then, subjected to gradual change, by the formation of the *speculative freemasons' lodge*, as we now know it. Suffice also to say, that the moral teaching of the traditional history of speculative freemasonry is much more important than the establishment of its factual historical detail.

Of the three degrees of speculative freemasonry, the Second appears to be the most interesting to those who pursue the teachings of the craft, since it is this degree which opens the door to the *hidden mysteries of nature and science*, a practically unlimited range of investigation and study.

The traditional history of the Fellowcraft Degree tells us that our ancient brethren, having worked at the building of KST and being entitled to wages, went to receive them in the middle chamber, which they reached by means of the *winding staircase*. This story of the winding stairs forms an important tradition of Freemasonry, but derives very little support from the VSL. The only allusion being in the First Book of Kings, Ch 6 Vs 8, and I quote, *the door for the middle chamber was in the right side of the house and they went up with winding stairs into the middle chamber and out of the middle into the third*. This is slender material to build on, but an allegory can be constructed from it. It conveys a philosophical lesson and is not intended to be a narration of fact.

What then, is the true design of the legend of the winding stairs? What lesson of symbolism is it intended to convey? To answer these questions, we must bear in mind that the whole design of speculative freemasonry is the discovery of **divine truth**. Everything in our traditional ceremonies proceeds in accordance with this principle and tends to emphasise this aim. Hence there is, in speculative freemasonry, a constant progress symbolised by its peculiar ceremonies of initiation. The candidate is ever ascending, never stationary, and each step he takes brings him some mental illumination.

This principle of Masonic symbolism can be discovered in each degree. In that of the Entered Apprentice, we find it in the ladder reaching heavenward from earth. In the Fellowcraft degree, we find it developed in the legend of the winding stairs.

To realise the extent of the symbolic teaching of this allegory, let us consider the following points in it: -

- The place of **origin** of this winding staircase.
- The **number** of its steps.
- The **objects** to which those steps call attention.
- Their **termination**.
- The **result** which the ascent of them is **intended** to accomplish.

The stair begins in the porch of the temple (and here we must remember that, according to the symbolism of Freemasonry, the temple represents the world, purified by the divine presence, so that the initiated are said to be within the temple and the profane world is thought of as being outside its walls). Consequently, to pass within the porch of the temple is synonymous with being made a Freemason.

But, the First Degree is only preparatory. The Entered Apprentice is as a child, relative to mystic knowledge. Anything which he is taught, at this stage, is calculated to fit him for greater knowledge, to be presently conferred.

As a Fellowcraft, he has advanced another step. He has passed from childhood to youth and, consequently, here his real education may be said to begin. Here he finds before him, a winding stair inviting him to ascend, which teaches him that his Masonic labour must now begin. That he must now enter upon that study and research of which the end shall be **the knowledge of divine truth**. He may not stand still. He must seek the summit, step by step, for only at the summit, will he find true knowledge.

The number of these steps has varied under different systems, but it has always been an odd number. In the ancient system of Pythagorus, from which Freemasonry has largely borrowed, the symbolism of numbers played an important part. In that system, odd numbers were considered more perfect than even numbers. Hence, the adoption of an odd number for the stairs is intended to symbolise the perfection which the candidate must seek to attain. In our system, we speak of fifteen steps which we divide into three, five and seven. As each of these divisions is brought to his notice, the candidate receives instruction in its symbolic meaning.

He is instructed first in the organisation of the Masonic order – that three rule a lodge, five hold a lodge and seven, or more, make it perfect. Of itself, this information is barren and we must look to the symbolic meaning to discover the real value in it.

The reference to the organisation of Freemasonry is intended to bring the candidate to the thought of the union of men in society, to remind him of the blessings which flow from civilisation. Masonry itself, viewed in one aspect, is the result of civilisation, while, on the other, it has been one of the most potent factors in extending that happy condition among men.

All the monuments of antiquity combine to show that man had no sooner emerged from the savage to the social state, than he entered into the organisation of religious mysteries, the beginnings of architecture and the conception of science and geometry. All these are claimed as peculiarly connected with Freemasonry, which may be considered as the type of civilisation – masonry bearing the same relationship to the profane world that civilisation bears to the savage state. There is, therefore, a certain fitness in marking the novice's progress in search of the truth, by inculcating the importance of social union of mankind as a preparation for the assimilation of Masonic knowledge. Such then is conceived to be the symbolism of those allusions to the officers and the constituents of a Lodge, which characterise the first and second pauses in the ascent of the winding staircase.

But, at his third pause, the candidate learns something more. He reaches the point at which the whole circle of human science confronts him. Symbols, of course, are purely arbitrary and conventional and human learning might as well have been symbolised by any other signs, as by the *seven liberal arts and sciences*. Freemasonry, if not as venerable in its lineage as some enthusiasts maintain, is, at least, an institution which

has incorporated much of the wisdom of the ancients and this selection of the liberal arts and sciences, as a symbol of the completion of human learning, is distinct evidence of the antiquity of the sources from which it has derived its essential teachings.

From about the seventh century onward, the learning of the most eminent schools was limited to subjects which were called *the liberal arts and sciences* and consisted of two branches – the *trivium* and the *quadrivium*. The words are classical enough, but the meanings given to them here belong to the corrupt Latin of the middle ages. Among the old Romans, a trivium meant a place where three ways met, while a quadrivium was the meeting of four ways, or what is now called a “crossroad”. When, therefore, we speak of the *paths of learning*, we perceive the origin of the signification given to these terms by the scholastic philosophers of mediaeval times.

The trivium included grammar, rhetoric and logic. The quadrivium comprised arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy. These seven heads were supposed to embrace universal knowledge. He, who was master of them all, was thought to have no need of a teacher to solve any questions which lay within the compass of human reason – the knowledge of the trivium having given him the key to the study of language, while the knowledge of the quadrivium had opened for him the secret laws of nature. At a period when few were instructed in the trivium and still fewer studied the quadrivium, to be master of both was sufficient to complete the character of a learned man. We can see, then, the propriety of adopting the seven liberal arts and sciences as a symbol of the completion of human learning. The candidate, having attained this point, has reached the last step. He is now ready to receive his **reward**.

His reward is to consist in the knowledge of divine truth, for which all that went before was an intended preparation. That *divine truth* is always symbolised, in Freemasonry, by the *word*. And here I will allude again to the symbolism of numbers, which is presented to the Masonic student for consideration in this allegory of the winding stairs. The total number of steps in our system is fifteen and is a significant symbol. Fifteen was a sacred number among Orientals, because the letters composing the holy and ineffable name were, in their numerical value, equivalent to fifteen. Hence a figure in which nine digits were disposed to make fifteen either way, whether added together perpendicularly, horizontally or diagonally, constituted one of their most sacred talismans. The fifteen steps in the winding staircase are, therefore, intended to be symbolic of the name of God.

Having digressed, we return to the reward of the middle chamber set before the speculative Freemason. We know that his wage is not in money and not in corn, wine and oil. These things are merely symbols. His reward is **truth**, or such a measure of it as befits the degree he has attained. It is a provocative piece of teaching which Freemasonry gives us here – **that the Freemason is ever in search of truth but is never absolutely to find it**. This divine truth, the object of all his labours, is symbolised by the word, for which he can only obtain a substitute. This is intended to teach the humiliating, but necessary, lesson that, the knowledge of the Nature of God and of man’s relation to Him (which knowledge constitutes divine truth) can never be fully acquired in this little life of ours. The middle chamber is, therefore, typical of this mortal life, in which the truth is ever beyond us, but in which nevertheless, we are to learn that the truth will be found to consist in a knowledge of T.G.G.O.T.U.

It is then, as an allegory only, that we must study this legend of the winding stairs. Its authors offer it to us as a great philosophical lesson, as they did not imagine that we would pass over its sublime moral teaching – to construe the allegory as an historical narrative; to believe that this representation of an ascent of the human mind, through all the difficulties of obtaining knowledge; to believe that by adding to the stock of our ideas at each step until, in the middle chamber, the reward is attained; to believe that the earnest seeker is invested with that reward, in the direction of how to seek God and the knowledge of His nature and His will.

To believe all this is to know the true design of speculative Freemasonry and that it is the only design which is worthy of a wise man’s study.