



MASONIC SYMBOLS

[CIRCLE, SQUARE and COMPASSES, APRON, Etc.]

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In the lecture on the First T.B. we are told that the usages and customs of Freemasonry, our Rites and Ceremonies, our Signs and Symbols, correspond in a great degree with those of Antient Egypt. Their magi or philosophers, like ourselves, were accustomed to communicate with each other by Signs and Symbols; also that the system of Pythagoras was founded on a similar principle. This does not necessarily mean that Freemasonry was founded in Egypt, or that we know as Freemasonry had its origin in Egypt. It does mean, however, that the system of imparting our knowledge is the same as was used by the Adepts and Heiropphants of Egypt, many centuries ago, and that method of imparting knowledge was by symbolism. This method has a double advantage in that to the initiate it opens up a wonderful field of knowledge, and for research, while to others it conceals its truths and hides them under an impenetrable veil, Mackey in his encyclopaedia says: "A Symbol is defined to be a visible sign, with which a spiritual feeling, emotion or idea is connected." There is no doubt that man's earliest instruction was by means of Symbols, and it is by symbols that thoughts are both revealed and concealed.

Most, if not all, of the deeper realities of the Spirit are communicable only in Symbolic language. When we attempt to define God we find the truth of our teaching, that His Name "is of too ineffable a nature to be fully comprehended by human wisdom, or clearly pronounced by the tongue of any individual." In other words the things pertaining to the eternal are beyond the finite mind to grasp or of language to convey. It is here that the Symbol comes to our aid, and it is by the use, of a Symbol and in no other way that we can find any approach, any means to comprehend the eternal.

Men have always used Symbols in their religious exercises and even to-day, whether it is the image of wood, of ivory, of gold or whether it is the conception built up in the mind, yet to the discerning, they are but symbols of the Great reality.

The word Symbol, is derived from a Greek word which signifies to compare one thing with another. Thus the plumb is the symbol of rectitude, the level equality, the beehive industry, and so on.

So then Freemasonry is a system of Morality, illustrated by symbols, and we are further told that there is not a character or emblem in our Lodges but serves to inculcate the principles of Piety and Virtue amongst all its genuine professors. Everything in the Lodge that is used in any way has its symbolic meaning, and many of the Symbols have more than one meaning. There is a deeper meaning often underlying the obvious. It is not my purpose to attempt to explain all the Symbols of Freemasonry, as to do so would be totally beyond my ability, even if you were prepared to devote the time necessary to deal with such a vast subject. We speak glibly of the Secrets of Freemasonry, and many of us fondly consider that when we have acquired certain grips, tokens and words we are possessed of the secrets of our institution. This is only true in part and in a very small measure.

The Secrets of Freemasonry lie concealed in its ancient symbols, and these secrets remain as thickly veiled to many who are proud of the fact that they are members of a Masonic Lodge as to those whom we as Masons

refer to as the profane. In our lodges many of our members are quite content to have their ritual off letter perfect and to them Masonry has no further interest than ritual perfection.

To have a perfect knowledge of the ritual and to be able to deliver the various Charges and addresses with clarity and distinction is very commendable, and if we would aspire to office and to be Master of the Lodge, these are essential, but, we must ever remember that our ritual is not an end in itself, but only the means to an end.

We know that Masonry in its ritualism and charges teaches nothing in morals, in science, in religion, or in any department of human knowledge not taught elsewhere in current forms of thought, but as I have already said, it is in its Symbolism that its real secrets lie concealed. It is pleasing to know that there are many who desire a deeper knowledge of these Secrets, realizing as they do, that there must be other and more profound meanings behind the ritual and ceremony of the Lodge. These Secrets belong only to a few. This may be questioned by you, or, if admitted, you may ask, why? And the answer is that the candidate is debarred from possessing them solely by his own inattention to the hints given everywhere in the ritual or by his lack of interest in searching for them. An old Book, well known to you as one of the great lights of Masonry says: "Seek and ye shall find. Knock and it shall be opened to you. So that, in the short time I have, I want to examine one or two of our Symbols, and see if they have any teaching for us, whether they are the fount of wisdom that we are led to expect.

Let us take first the circle and the point within the circle. This is readily recognised as a Symbol of God. God who is the centre of all things and that by which all things are. It symbolises the life principle which is within everyone of us, Paul, one of the initiates of the past, says: "Know ye not that ye are the temple of the living God." But there is another and deeper meaning still, every atom in matter is full of Divinity. There is neither time nor place where He (that is Divinity) is not. Evolution is a formation, transformation, reformation in endless succession, always tending upwards towards the centre in Divinity. At the centre of every atom or sun lies Divinity, signifying unity, and at its circumference unfolds nature signifying diversity. Hence a circle whose centre is everywhere and circumference nowhere, signifying His omnipresence and perfection." (Buck).

This is the first postulate of what is known as the secret Doctrine; an Omnipotent, Eternal, Boundless and Immutable principle, co-extension in space, in all, through all, over all. Divinity imminent in Nature; the eternal cause and result, each without beginning and without end, and each alternating for ever. Such is some of the symbolism of the circle and the point within the circle.

The square and compasses are perhaps, the best known of all Masonic symbols. The square we are told, belongs to the whole Craft, and the compasses to the G.M. In the lecture on the tools we are told both the operative uses of these instruments and their symbolic significance.

May we here extend the symbolism of these well-known working tools. The square, with its one right angle and its scale of measurements, applies to surfaces and solids, and deals apparently with fixed states of matter. It represents solidarity, symmetry and proportion, and this involves the sciences of geometry and arithmetic.

The compasses, with a movable angle, set in the Lodge at an angle of 60 degrees, applies to the circle and the sphere, movements and revolutions. In a general sense the square represents matter and the earth, and the compasses spirit and the heavens. The compasses are set of an angle of 60 degrees and is the representation of the movement of the spirit, and if crossed at a certain distance from the angle will produce the equilateral triangle, the three angles and the three sides equal, it now represents perfect equilibrium or proportions.

For the E.A. the points of the C are below the S. For the F.C. one is above and one is below and for the M.M. both are above, symbolising that the spiritual is now dominant to rule and control the earthly and material. In the man of ignorance (the sinful man) the spirit is concealed. The material, the earthly, the carnal is predominant. The potentialities are there, but they are covered, held down. The body and its passions are dominant. This is the state of the E.A. (figurative). To the F.C. the symbols are interlaced, symbolising that he has begun to realise his spiritual nature, and by allowing the spiritual essence from above to mingle in his life, he is enabled to overcome in some degree his lower nature.

In the M.M. degree matter is subordinated to spirit. This is brought about by a constant practice of the sublime precepts, which are taught in the various degrees. To subdue our passions and prejudices, circumscribing our desires, and keeping them within due bounds. By this means the spirit (compasses) will gradually gain dominion over the material.

This brings us to perfect equilibrium of spirit and matter, which is typified by the six pointed star. If we set this star in a circle, which symbolises eternity or infinity, there is symbolised the at-one-ment of the spirit, which descended and the body now purified, with divinity. In addition Place within this the Egyptian Symbol of Life (Circle over a Cross) and we symbolize immortality, through, or as a result of regeneration.

Thus Freemasonry is the conquest of the Human which is in Man, by the Divine - the over-coming of the appetites and passions by moral sense and reason, by a continual effort and struggle and warfare of the Spiritual against the Material and sensual. Thus the S. & C., with its allied or developed Symbol of the interlaced Triangle and the Circle convey to our mind the idea of an eternally existent deity, without beginning and without ending : as the Kabala puts it, whose end is his beginning and whose beginning is his ending, unified in a point within that circle, and that point may be found in the Microcosm, or smaller creation, which is man. God is the center of His being, which is one of the great truths taught in the second degree. This is made possible through a regeneration, symbolised by the S. & C or interlaced triangles with the circle enclosing again within itself the Crux Ansata, the symbol of Life, or Immortal Life.

Sometimes we find within the central triangle the Hebrew Yod.

On the floor of the Lodge are the Rough and perfect Ashlar. The Rough Ashlar, we are told, is a stone rough and unhewn, as taken from the quarries, and represents the mind of man, rough and unpolished as that stone, but which, by the care of his parents or guardians in giving him a liberal and virtuous education, become cultivated, and he thereby becomes a fit member of civilized society. While the perfect Ashlar is a stone of a true die or square, and represents the mind of man after a life well spent in acts of piety and virtue, which cannot otherwise be tried and proved than by the square of God's word and the compasses of his own self convincing conscience. As the stone comes from the quarry, so every man and woman is born, and that into which they shall be shaped depends on many craftsmen. But in the last recourse the craftsman is always oneself, and this work of our development, the earnest seeker after truth or a higher life, goes on from day to day. The last touch that we can give to this stone is when death, like a W.M. adjourns the Lodge of our earthly existence, and we pass on to work in another and grander Lodge.

Another very important Symbol is the Masonic Apron. The candidate is instructed that this badge is more ancient than the Golden Fleece or the Roman Eagle, and when worthily worn more honourable than the Garter or any other honour that earthly power can bestow.

This is a great claim to make in such a connection, yet it is a claim that is made for the E.A. Apron. As to its antiquity in relation to the Golden Fleece or Roman Eagle, the Order of the Golden Fleece was established in Flanders in 1429 by the Duke of Burgundy, and was considered an order of high honour among the knighthood of that time.

The Roman Eagle was the emblem of Imperial power in the great days of Rome, 2,000 years ago.

It appears that in all ages the apron or some distinguishing badge has been worn by initiates into any of the mysteries. In the Israelitish ceremonies the Priests were invested with a special girdle. In the Mysteries of Mithras in Persia the candidate was invested with a white apron, while in drawing's which we have of the old Egyptian Priests, we see that they are wearing a triangular apron, suspended by its apex and beautifully embellished with various symbols.

The Order of the Garter is considered the greatest honour that can be bestowed by the King of our Empire upon one of his subjects, yet we are told that when worthily worn this Apron is more honourable than the Order of the Garter.

At his investiture this Apron is described as the peculiar badge of a Mason, being the badge of innocence, and the bond of friendship. It is of pure white lamb-skin, and no matter what embellishments the F.M.

acquires in his Masonic career, yet that plain lambskin with which he was first invested symbolises that which there is nothing higher or more enduring if once we succeed in attaining. It signifies a life of service and vicarious sacrifice, of purity in life and character.

As the badge of a F.M. it is worn outside all other garments and is the outward and visible sign that the wearer is a member of the craft. The Apron itself is not the inner reality, it is not purity, or innocence, or brotherhood, it is the symbol of all these and more, the representation in form of spiritual realities. The F.M. having worn it worthily, it is deposited in the grave at the close of his earthly life.

The candidate who accepts this badge of purity and innocence binds himself to exemplify these qualities of life and conduct, and to stand forth before the eyes of men and in the presence of God, as a living exposition of the principles and tenets of a F.M. This is an honour that is not in the power of any Monarch to bestow.

The first investiture of a candidate also symbolises the entrance of his Soul or real self into the material world. The upper part, the triangle relating to his spiritual nature and the quadrangle to his material form.

The investiture of the candidate in the three craft degrees takes place in the west and not by the Master, but by his principle officer. The meaning here symbolised is that the spiritual principle, Ego, or Soul is here in this material world but temporarily, and while it is here it is supplied with a material body or covering by nature, who is here the chief officer in this cosmic world. This is symbolised by the S.W. who is the chief officer next to the Master in the Lodge. The investitures in all further degrees I believe take place in the east.

When the flap of the apron is up it suggests the five points, also the five senses which enable it to comprehend the things around us.

In the Apron is symbolised the square or rectangle and the Triangle. The Triangle is the emblem in the main of the spirit and pertaining to the spiritual, while the square has more particular reference to the earth and things material. I say in the main, because while the triangle with its point up-wards is said to represent fire, with its point downwards it is the emblem of water, but water is looked upon as the material. The different manners in which the Apron is worn indicate different ideas and thoughts. With the flap up it indicates that we have both a Spiritual and also a material nature, but that in the E.A. the spiritual, while above is separate or at least has not made its influence felt. The Apron is not usually worn in this manner in these days, but down. Still here is something of the same significance. There is the square representing the material nature and over this the triangle, in its watery passive aspect, seeking to manifest in, or fecundate the material nature with a new life. The next step shows the Apron with two rosettes affixed. This brings to our view the emblems of the interlacing triangle although it is only, as it were, a shadow.

The symbolism is somewhat akin to that mentioned earlier in the address except that in this downward pointed triangle is the emblem of the mental or psychic nature rather than that of matter, while the upward pointed one refers to the spiritual nature. The rectangle of the Apron symbolises the material. The fire triangle you will perceive is not entirely dominant yet, only the two lower points being shown, the upper and perhaps most important being supposedly hidden or covered by the other triangle, thus showing the progress that the spiritual is making in the work of bringing into subjection all other faculties in our nature.

In the final Apron in craft Masonry the third rosette is added, which takes us a step further in this thought of regeneration. The fire triangle is complete in that it displays the three points, and as such is emblematic of the increasing influence of the spiritual over the Physical, Mental and Physic Nature, but it is still but a shadow or adumbration of that Spiritual reality which becomes manifest in the degree which is the Summum Bonum of our order.

The tassels on the Apron undoubtedly come from the strings with which it was fastened on, when being worn. The blue bordering is emblematic of that universal friendship and brotherhood which should characterise the whole of the Craft. Moreover, blue symbolised to the Israelite of old Purity, fidelity.

There is much more that might be said of the Apron indeed there is sufficient of interest in the explanation to require the whole time of the lecture. There are also many symbols which call for our attention, and I can

only hope that by the lectures that we have the privilege of hearing, and the books we can read, we may discover more of the beautiful of our Masonic institution.