

The Second Degree

A lecture presented by
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I would like to speak tonight on the 2nd Degree or as it is otherwise known as the Fellowcraft Degree. This Degree is often relegated in our minds to an inferior position compared to the 1st Degree or the 3rd Degree. I suppose this is natural in some ways as the First Degree is what it says - the first time a candidate enters the Lodge. It has quite a traumatic aura about it as we have seen on the faces of some candidates at the conclusion of this degree. Something they have never experienced in their whole life.

The Third Degree examines the greatest question mark in our lives - death itself it has some wonderful charges - such as the Traditional Histories - the reading from the Ecclesiastics Chapter 12 and culminating in the candidate receiving his very own Master Masons apron. But the Second Degree, what does it convey ? Where does it fit into Freemasonry ?

To understand this we must first look back into the history of the old days of English operative masonry . A man in those days was first made an entered apprentice. In other words he entered into an apprenticeship and was bonded or indentured to a master mason. This apprenticeship was usually of a period of seven years and at the termination of that period our apprentice was made a fellow of the craft. By this is meant that he was installed as a member of the operative lodge in full standing and with every right enjoyed by all other masons, and that he had become a master of his trade or a master mason. From that time on he was free to travel where he wished in search of employment and to receive a masters wages.

Apprentices received no wages except board and keep and possibly something in the way of finding, that is an apron, gloves or maybe a few tools. It is difficult now to know what form of ceremony our fellowcraft would go through on becoming such a person. We may be sure that he would have to take a simple oath or promise to keep inviolate all the secrets of the trade and of the household of the master and dame with whom he had lived. He would probably also have been given certain bits of advice perhaps in the shape of what we would now call lectures.

He would also be given grips and words so as he would be known as a fellow should he seek employment elsewhere.

It would appear that operative masons had two degrees with peculiar secrets and signs, one was the apprentice degree and the other a fellow or master mason degree. Later in the formalities of the first grand lodge of speculative masons in London in 1717 the last degree was divided into two, giving a fellow craft and a master mason degree. From the old monitors who developed our ritual, it is evident that these men intended the second degree to cover that part of a mans career which falls between his youth and his old age. The lodge symbolises the world as a whole. The apprentice, the youth entering it and the master mason, a man leaving it. The fellowcraft is a man in the heyday of his powers, equipped to carry the burdens of his world and trained to do its work. This work of the world,- this great enterprise of organised human life.- How is it to be carried forward. Not by ignorance surely. For it is the essence of ignorance to be helpless, neither can it be done by unskilled hands, for life is complicated and involves an endless amount of technique. No, it rests on the shoulders of those who have knowledge, skill and experience, and such, is the principle idea of the fellowcraft degree, It embodies education and the philosophy of enlightenment. From our own practical experience we know how the second degree is usually viewed in most lodges. We know it is not taken as seriously as the first or third degree and often if the lodge has quite a few candidates, a second degree will be given away to another lodge not so fortunate. Such is the casual way we think about this degree. It is thought of a sort of halfway ceremony between the first and third which doesn't deserve much thought or skill in carrying it out. The irony of such thought cannot escape notice especially in view of the

fact that this degree is dedicated to enlightenment or knowledge which in itself is one of the grand aims of our order. Let us think further on the second degree being a symbolism of middle life. To many the middle ages of our lives are the most challenging and the hardest to bear. Dante, that great poet began the journey of his book "The Divine Comedy" at the mid-point of his life. In his opening sentence he says thus.

" In the midway of this our mortal life
I found me a gloomy wood, astray,
Gone from the path direct, and e'en to tell
It were no easy task, how savage wild
That forest, how robust and rough its growth
Which to remember only, my dismay
Renews, in bitterness not far from death."
That Forest of life encountered in middle age.

Dante also says, Thus pushing his way through this wilderness of the world that he was confronted by the panther which was sensualism. The lion, hunger mad which was ambition and pride and the lean she-wolf of avarice-(greed)- some of the temptations of middle life. It is the midway point in life that is the hardest. Gone is the exciting expectations of youth, the never-ending energy - the finest ideal - lost in the burdens and toils of everyday life. Life can seem hard and harsh, and it is then that a man sweats under his burdens and asks himself bitter questions. It is the period when family cares and family demands are at their maximum, when there is the greatest danger of business or professional failure. How many examples of this do we see around us today. Redundancy at middle age. What a traumatic experience. It is midway in this our mortal life that one enters the inferno. Paradise lies far beyond it, if at all. The midway is the fellowcraft period of life - When the soul passes through the ordeal of the second degree. In that old tradition of King Solomon's building of the temple it says, he set three score and 10 thousand of them to be bearers of burden and four score thousand to be hewers in the mountains and three thousand and six hundred overseers to set the people at work. When one finds himself among the eighty thousand fellowcrafts a bearer of burdens or a hewer in the mountains, it is little wonder if he despairs of his old hopes, his old ideals. Nevertheless it is then, if ever, that a man becomes a man worthy in the eyes of God to be entrusted with responsibility. For as the beautiful lesson of our fellowcraft degree has it, there is a middle chamber to be entered after one has climbed the wearisome winding stairs. The wages were not what one expected in youth, but they are better if one has been a faithful workman. Courage, endurance, fidelity, patience, these are the rewards in which after they are once gained a man finds more happiness than in garlands or honours. And how does a fellowcraft survive this middle period of life. Let us turn to the working tools of this degree. This charge is probably one of the best in the ritual book.

It is so practical and seems to tie us so smoothly into the realm of an operative mason as well as a speculative mason. The tools are the square, the level and the plumb rule. They represent the basic attitudes which should always distinguish a freemason. The square - that practical tool which is needed to make sure that a building is straight and true. It assists in bringing rude matter into due form. It creates order out of chaos. As applied to our own lives it teaches and represents morality. It tells us that before we can have a pure life - useful in the sight of God and man - we must get our morality right - no sexual deviations, no dishonest dealings, no lying or cheating, no violence or hatred. To act on the square before God and all mankind is one of the highest pinnacles to which a freemason can attain. The level demonstrating the undeniable truth that we have all been made by God the great creator. Every human being on this earth is part of the brethren. We all partake the same nature and share in the same hope. What makes the difference in the sight of our great architect - not money, not rank or eminence, not size or strength, but goodness and virtue. These are distinctions which carry on through the grave to the grand lodge above. The infallible plumb rule is the criterion of rectitude and truth, teaching us to walk justly and uprightly before God and man; teaching us to be honest and kind, to be able to distinguish between evil and good, to act justly, to subdue our passions, and always to have eternity in view. If we follow the teachings of the sacred volume we have blessed hope that we will ascend to those eternal mansions whence all goodness emanates.

Take the secrets in the second degree- where Joshua commanded the sun and moon to stand still until the people had avenged themselves upon their enemies - "and it is written in the volume of the Sacred Law that the sun stood still and the moon stayed." In recent years scientists delving back into antiquity by means of computers discovered time was 24 hours out - one day was missing. When? When Joshua fought the battles

of the Lord. What does the 2nd degree say? Study the liberal arts and sciences, and estimate the wondrous works of the Almighty Creator.

The second degree finishes with the charge after passing. Here we are enjoined to conform to the principles of order. We are expected to persevere in the practice of every virtue. We are recommended to a study of the liberal arts which tends so effectually to polish and adorn the mind. We are asked to preserve our ancient usages and customs and promote the values of freemasonry.

We are exhorted to help our brethren. Not to encourage him in wrong doing, but on the contrary to judge him with candour, admonish him with friendship and reprehend him with mercy. We are to supply the wants and relieve the necessities of brethren and fellows to the utmost of our power and ability and never wrong a brother or see him wronged, but stand behind him through thick and thin. This is what a fellowcraft should know. The need, the nature and the purpose of education, and secondly the realisation of the disastrous consequences of ignorance. As we have said a human being begins life in utter helplessness. Eventually though, he becomes a man fully grown and equipped to do his own share of the work in the world, and to live his own life as a man should. He should be able to confront the universe as an intelligent being. The sum total of the influences that bridge the gap between helplessness and maturity is education and this is what the second degree advocates. The ritual exhorts us to improve our intellectual powers, qualify ourselves to become a more useful member of society and like a skilful brother, strive to excel in what is good and great. This is the grand and end goal of every mason.

Brethren next time you carry out the ceremony of the second degree, remember the important place it holds in the whole gambit of the three degrees in freemasonry. It is not just a fill in degree between the first and third, but forms a very important bridge between birth and death, both in masonic terms and also as a plan for practical living. It is a conscious shaping of the progress of growth - the purposeful direction of experience towards the end of a fully developed manhood that is the grand end and goal of every mason. We are enjoined to be enflamed with the study of learning and admiration of virtue. This degree should stir us to become knowledgeable masons. worthy to be servants of God in the most important period of our lives and willing to gain the experience which will carry us on successfully to death itself and even beyond.

Brethren may I just before closing refer to the letter "G" which hangs in the middle of our fellow craft lodges and is a most important symbol. Some masons would say it stands for Geometry while others say it stands for God Himself. In either event and in the last analysis the significance is the same. In the early periods of the world's existence men were most childlike in their perceptions. The natural scheme of things must have puzzled them almost beyond endurance. It seemed like chaos. To men living under such conditions, however with the discovery of order with the discovery of numbers - of geometry, it must have seemed almost like a new religion. Little wonder they made so much of numbers calling them sacred. Geometry is a revelation of order and God is the origin of orderliness of the universe.

The God of heaven and earth is the beginning and end of all masonic mysteries. It was from Him that we came and it is to Him that we go. There are those that say science disproves God, but we can be sure that scientists will find God as surely as a saint does because He is there and that fact cannot be disputed. Therefore we do not have to fear education and research for these lead to truth, which is God Himself.

This is the real holy of holies, the true inner chamber into which at last a fellow craft comes.

I feel worshipful master and brethren that the letter "G" can stand either for Geometry representing order or God who is all things - order and truth. As our ritual states the symbol alludes to the Grand Geometrician of the universe.

I hope I have given you all enough food for thought to encourage you to delve more deeply into this lovely degree and maybe give you a new insight into its tremendous teachings. Remember - the first degree is youth - the fellowcraft degree middle age and the third degree - old age. Such is the progression of freemasonry.

Thank you once again for inviting me to speak on this subject this evening. It did encourage me to research more about the second degree and I must confess that I have now changed from the casual attitude I too had towards this degree, to a more appreciative knowledge of its symbolism.