

The First Degree

The Novice who has been newly initiated into Freemasonry in the first degree cannot fail to be impressed with the beauty and solemnity of the ceremony. It is to be expected that the impressions thus made upon his mind will endure as long as life itself. But at the same time, it must be realized that even a most intelligent novice will not have remembered clearly the great and comprehensive volume of symbolic teaching then revealed to him, and much less will he have grasped its real meaning. This essay is intended to assist the novice to recall in detail and understand in some measure the ceremony that so profoundly impressed him.

"Freemasonry is a peculiar system of morality, veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols."

The great teachers of the world have made free use of allegory or parable in their teachings. The wisdom of this is apparent. Language changes and the degree of culture fluctuates from age to age, but human nature changes not, or at any rate imperceptibly. Each generation will draw its own lessons for the symbols, legends and allegories of Freemasonry; and the higher the standard of intelligence and culture the higher will those lessons be.

The teachings of Freemasonry are founded upon the science or art of architecture (in early Masonry sometimes termed geometry) which among all races of mankind was one of the first sciences to evolve. Primitive man having learned to feed and clothe himself, under the urge for progress and improvement would begin to provide for himself better habitations to shelter him from rain and cold. Among intelligent peoples the science developed rapidly. The kindred sciences of mathematics and geometry lent their aid. Architects vied with each other in the beauty and stability fo their buildings. Some very ancient temples in which are now considered very backward countries still excite the wonder and admiration of the world.

Those engaged in such work would no doubt be drawn from amongst the most intelligent of the various peoples. The desire for mutual instruction in their difficult art, and also for the protection of their profession or trade, would lead those engaged in it to form Guilds or brotherhoods. An art of such complexity would require many years of earnest application to acquire even reasonable proficiency in it. The Guilds would function in part as academies or teaching institutions for the instruction of members. There would naturally be a desire to protect the trade secrets and learning so laboriously acquired from the outside world, and the Guilds would become secret societies.

In all societies of earnest and educated men, the desire for moral culture to supplement the merely secular soon manifests itself. It is not surprising therefore to find evidence that these ancient societies of builders extended their researches into the sphere of heavenly science, using the tools of their trade as symbols for moral teaching. This will provide a useful and interesting avenue for study for the novice as he progresses in the knowledge of the craft. He will find that although Freemasonry as we know it today is comparatively modern (the Grand Lodge of England having been founded in 1717 A.D.), it has its roots in the past, and that teachings, methods and symbols similar to ours have been practiced and used by associations of men in various parts of the world from times of great antiquity.

But for the novice preparing for a higher degree it will be more useful to proceed to expound the message of Freemasonry to the present age.

As a Religion

Freemasonry is non-sectarian and non-political. It is open to just, upright and free men of mature age, sound judgment and strict morals. It is broad enough to embrace, and it does embrace, men of every race, religion and shade of political thought. It requires a belief in a Supreme Being and in a future life. The central teaching of the First Degree is that of the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man. We are never to mention the

sacred name of God save with awe and reverence. It inculcates the duty of prayer, and the imploring of Divine aid in all our lawful undertakings. It teaches that God is the source from whence all goodness emanates; that He is just and merciful, that we can look to Him at all times for comfort and support. It also inspires faith in "His gracious promises of peace and salvation for the faithful and obedient of the human race."

Thus it will be recognized is common ground with all the principal religions. Beyond this Masonry does not dogmatize in particular theories or forms of belief, or means of salvation. It does not purport to take the place of the religions of mankind, but rather to encourage its members to be faithful and zealous in the performance of the duties laid down by the particular religion to which they belong.

As a Moral Code.

The morality of Masonry includes, but it is not restricted to, the Ten Commandments. It includes all the higher principles of conduct which the laws of God have laid down, and the experience of mankind has proved to be right. The novice should carefully study the "Ancient Charge," which in clear and eloquent language inculcates the duties of justice, fortitude, prudence, temperance, truth, virtue and charity. It points out the duties we owe to God, to our neighbor, and ourselves, as individuals, as members of organized society, as citizens of the country in which we reside or are domiciled, and as subjects of the country of our birth.

Freemasons are enjoined not to do or countenance anything calculated to subvert the peace and good order of society. This it will be seen refers to revolutionary methods. A Mason in his private capacity as a citizen is not debarred from using to the full all his private rights and powers in a constitutional way to promote the good government and prosperity of his country. The Ritual is silent as the duty of a Mason where the private rights of the people have been usurped and a tyranny established, and in such a case it is suggested that he would be free to act as his enlightened conscience indicating to be in the best interests of his country. Oliver, commenting on the symbols of the Sword and Trowel, says that "next to obedience to lawful authority, a manly and determined resistance to lawless violence is an essential part of social duty." But as an institution Freemasonry takes no part in politics, and no topic of a political or sectarian nature is allowed to be discussed in a lodge.

Symbolic Teaching.

The foregoing is a brief commentary of some of the teachings set out in the Ritual. But there remains a wealth of teaching by symbols, from which each Mason according to his knowledge and experience will draw his own lessons.

A candidate is prepared for initiation in a certain way, and afterwards passes through a number of stages in his progress in Masonry, the purpose of which is to figuratively portray our human life, its moral end, and our final triumph over death itself.

On his first entrance into a lodge a candidate for initiation is received in a certain way. This depicts the entrance of all men upon the threshold of life. It would also seem to indicate the entrance of a man of mature age into the world of men, to make his way therein. He learns from the symbols that "Life is a battle, not a victory." He must face the ordeal with courage and humility; courage to meet the trials and tribulations that await him, and humility that he may put his trust in God and rely upon His sure support. Also he has much to earn and must comport himself with prudence. He learns that life to be rightly lived must not transgress the rules which the cumulative wisdom of mankind under Divine guidance has devised. He must not rashly rush forward and trample underfoot the rights of others. As a member of society no man giveth unto himself; he must have a care for the general well-being of the race and be prepared if necessary to restrain or curtail his

own natural liberty for the common good. Neither must he cravenly retreat from his responsibilities as a social being. There are duties to his brother Masons and to mankind at large which he must not shirk. A selfish disregard of these duties would in due time cause the sword of remorse to pierce the heart with grief, and would strangle the noblest aspirations of his soul.

A Free Man

A candidate then learns that to become a Freemasonry he must be a free man. This relates back to the days of slavery, but even to-day it has an important meaning. It indicates that no man who is in bondage to any gross and sinful conduct can expect to become a worthy Mason. If such a man should have gained entry thus far into a Lodge it is incumbent on him that he should at this stage either voluntarily retire, or sincerely resolve to abandon for ever the bonds that hitherto have bound him.

Passing in View.

A candidate learns that he must endure the scrutiny and criticism of his fellow men, and that therefore he must comport himself with decency and decorum, so that his reputation and that of the Order to which he seeks admission shall not suffer.

At that stage in some Lodges an appropriate passage of Scripture is recited, which falls upon the ear of the candidate like a benediction and figuratively indicates that having been scrutinized and approved by the Brethren, he is accepted by them in a bond of unity, and the Divine blessing invoked upon him and them as the dew that descended in copious measure upon the mountains of Zion. (Psalm 133.)

The Brethren, through their spokesman, then formally sanctions his entry amongst them, and he is taught to be mindful of his steps through life.

The candidate then for the first time employs the symbols of the S. and the V. of the S.L., the purport and uses of which are at a later stage explained to him.

The reasons for and the purport of the ob. are then explained to the candidate, and he is asked if he is prepared to take it. This is in keeping with the justice for which Masonry stands, as it would be obviously unfair to exact any promises, however proper and laudable, unless the nature of such promises is first explained and disclosed.

The Ob. . . n.

The Novice will rightly conclude from the wording that it bears evidence of great antiquity. It is intended to make a deep and lasting impression on the mind and conscience. It is binding only on the conscience of the person taking it. It does not infer that any punishment of any kind would be inflicted on a renegade Mason by his Brethren, for such is not the case. Masonry stands squarely for respect for and support of the civil law. It arrogates no physical punishments to itself, nor will it shelter anyone, whether a Mason or not, from the operation of the law. It is indeed the duty of every Mason to reprehend with mercy a Brother who is in fault. The only punishment of a Mason who violates his Ob. is that inflicted by his own accusing conscience, and the knowledge that in the eyes of the Masonic world he stands revealed as a person void of all moral worth and unfit to mingle with decent men.

The Dawn of Wisdom.

The prudent Novice having now had some experience of the world, and having used his observations and intelligence, will find the dawn of wisdom begin to lighten his darkness. His attention is directed to the Great Emblematical Lights of Freemasonry, and the purpose of the same are briefly stated. This brief statement is, however, of the greatest importance as it contains the first express teaching of the philosophy of Masonry. It inculcates the duty of personal integrity and uprightness; of measuring and circumscribing our

actions with a view to the general well-being of society, and of doing both under the guidance of and really as co-workers with T.G.A.O.T.U., in accordance with the teachings of the particular faith or religion to which we adhere. The V. of the S.L. varies with the prevailing religion of the country where the Lodge is held. In Christian countries it is the Bible, in Mohammedan countries the Koran. Inferentially the broad tolerance of Masonry and the freedom of the individual conscience, is inculcated. The Novice will find this teaching emphasized and amplified as he proceeds, and that all the symbols of Freemasonry are designed to impress these vital truths upon the tablets of his mind.

Many things at first mysterious and intangible will now take shape and meaning. He will find that as far as he is concerned a few simple rules will suffice as the lights of his firmament. The sacred writings containing the religious experience of the ages will suffice as a guide to his faith in God. Regular conduct which harms neither himself nor others will be found the best and most satisfying, and following the noblest prompting of his heart will keep him in due bounds with all mankind.

"To thy own self be true,
And it must follow as the night the day
Thou canst not then be false to any any man."

Certain reference is made in the Ritual to the sun and the moon. It is just possible that this may be a fragment that has come down from very ancient times, when Sun worship and Moon worship may have been practice by some early predecessors of our present system of Masonry. This reference now teaches us the duty of disseminating light and knowledge to the best of our ability to all mankind, and this implies that we should be assiduous in gaining light and knowledge for ourselves.

The Secrets.

Certain simple secrets are in use amongst Freemasons to enable one Brother to recognize another in any part of the world. A Mason is one whose character has been investigated, who has been tried and found worthy, and this in itself is a most useful introduction between Brothers who meet each other for the first time. But it is suggested that a Mason should proceed with caution and refrain from taking a Brother to his heart until evidence is adduced that the Brother is still in good standing in his Lodge.

These signs are in themselves symbolic and remind us of the teachings of the Craft. For obvious reasons they cannot be further commented on here. The Novice must use the utmost caution in communicating them.

The Testing.

The Brother is taught that in Masonry, as in the world, a man must be tried and tested before the full insignia of his worth are accorded him.

Investiture.

The symbol of purity and innocence is then eloquently impressed on the mind of the Novice also the necessity for the sincerity which will not admit of any concealment or hypocrisy in our professions of brotherly love.

Charity.

Charity is the brightest jewel in the crown of Masonry. The charge in the N.E.C. is intended to impress this virtue pre-eminently upon the mind of the newly-made Mason. The method employed is distinctive and impossible to forget. Charity in Masonry has the same meaning as in the 13th chapter of the 1st Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians. This chapter should be carefully studied and committed to memory by every Mason. The term charity implies a sympathetic heart, filled with loving-kindness and a sense of brotherhood. Not only should we be ready to help those in distress and worthy of assistance with monetary aid, or help to find employment, but we should be willing in a kindly and uncensorous way to give counsel, advice and encouragement to those

in need of it. At times it may even involve brotherly correction or censure, but ever the helping hand and the kindly smile of sympathy that sweeten life.

Mode of Preparation.

The reason for this are sufficiently explained in the Ritual. We may here comment on the fact that women are not admitted into the Order. This is sometimes a cause of objection or suspicion on the part of women against it. The chief reason no doubt is that Freemasonry is the lineal descendant of operative Masonry which from its nature was confined to the male sex. Besides, those qualities of sterling manhood which Freemasonry fosters can best be inculcated and developed in a society confined to men only. But there is no society which inculcates a more tender regard for women than Freemasonry, and if its principles are carried out it cannot fail to make every member of the craft a better husband, son, brother or friend, a champion and defender of all that is best and noblest in womanhood.

The Novice is taught that he should approach the threshold of Freemasonry with sincere heart and humble spirit. he should before entering the Lodge lay down his arms, of preconceived notions and prejudices, and earnestly seek to grasp and understand the lessons it has to teach, which he will thereafter apply according to his knowledge and culture and as his conscience shall dictate. He is further taught that the greatest and most sacred things of life are not to be purchased.

The Working Tools.

These are also suitably explained in the Ritual. The lessons drawn therein can however be greatly extended and applied in limitless ways.

We are taught to divide our time in such a way as to enable us to give attention to the systematic cultivation of our several faculties. Due time must be reserved for our religious pursuits. Due time also for the labor by which we gain our sustenance and comforts for ourselves and those dependent on us, with something over to help a Brother in his time of need. Time for the exercise of our virtues, and the stern repression of our faults and vices.

The authority and freedom of the individual conscience is here impressed. Conscience must be the arbiter of our actions. But conscience, to give a just and true decision, must be properly informed. How much evil has been wrought and is being wrought in the world by conscience based on ignorance or prejudice? Before coming to a hard and fast decision in any matter of conduct a Mason should, within an open mind, thoroughly inform himself on every aspect of the question. If the subject should be of such a nature as to be beyond the scope of his knowledge or mental attainments, it is suggested by the writer that rather than act on intuition based on ignorance, a brother would be acting more in conformity with genuine conscience, if in such a case he should adopt the counsel of someone of ripe knowledge and experience, whose probity and high ideals can be relied upon. But a Freemason cannot be excused for remaining ignorant. He must arrange his time with method so as to allow scope for the improvement of his mind, and his growth in knowledge and wisdom.

The object of all this is to make us better and more capable men and citizens, able and willing to perform our duties in organized society for the general good of mankind.

Architecture.

In the scheme of the 1st Degree, God is considered as the Great Architect. The Mason is depicted as a builder, working according to the plans of the Divine Architect. The symbolism is based upon the Temple of Jerusalem. But in reality each builder is engaged on the edifice of his own character. He uses the corner stone of Charity, or perfect love to exclude all vice. The builder is, however, not perfect in his craft, but is expected to do his utmost to erect a building worthy in some measure of the Divine plans and precepts provided for his guidance, so that in the end he may be found worthy to ascend to that Grand Lodge above where the blessed ever rest in eternal

peace.

But while the primary and only direct object of Masonry is the improvement of the individual, it follows as a natural consequence that society must benefit as a result of its teachings. The Freemason must not be self-centered. He is one of many builders each engaged in raising the temple of his own character, but all conjointly engaged on the fabric of society. Each should realize that this civilization, which our fathers wrought in blood and tears, is handed down from generation to generation as a sacred trust.

In our capacity of citizens of the world it is our duty to preserve what is good in it; to remedy what is defective, and to carry on the building to the best of our ability to the plan of the Great Architect in wisdom, strength and beauty; till the earth shall be emancipated from injustice and evil, and the mantle of universal charity shall encompass all mankind.

By W. Bro. T. J. Fleming, 29th August, 1929

Published in "Selected Papers" of United Masters Lodge, No. 167, Auckland, New Zealand.