

THE WORKING TOOLS

W.M. and brethren all: -

All my life I have loved tools! At a very early age I was taught to use them and care for them. I have a much-treasured collection of them, and as a Professional Engineer, tools have, of course, been very much a part of my life. It is but natural, then, that they symbolism of working-tools in our Masonic ritual speaks to me with great eloquence. Of all the beautiful and moving charges and lectures in the three degrees of our Lodge work, those which accompany the presentation of the Working Tools are my first favorites.

It has been well said that Freemasonry means different things to different brethren, and these are the purely personal reflections of an undistinguished Master Mason, which may, I hope, evoke some useful musings within this parallelepipedon.

(A) The 24-inch gauge

The first implement placed in the hands of the new apprentice, we are told, is the 24-inch gauge, or as we should nowadays say, the two-foot rule; that common implement in the hip-pocket of every working artisan. Its purpose, we are taught, is "to ascertain the extent of the work in which were about to engage, and to compute the time and labor it may cost."

The first tool given to us as tiny children, when we come forth as entered apprentices in the business of Life, is the priceless gift of our intellect - that faculty by which we are enabled to distinguish one thing from another, the good from the bad, the gold from the dross; our ability to assess, to compare, to measure, as with a two-foot rule, the worth of everything we say and do. Intellect, added to years of experience and self-discipline as we progress into mature age, ripens into sagacity, a quality which should surely characterize all brother Masons. The sagacious man measures, as with a twenty-four-inch gauge, the true worth of his every word and act - its honesty, its integrity, its sincerity, and above all, its effect on other people.

Again, we are admonished to observe that this humble tool is divided into twenty-four parts, as the day is divided into twenty-four hours, and bids us make proper use of our time, that ever more precious commodity. One thing that sickens me in contemplating the behavior of some of our street-corner youth-groups, is their profligate and iniquitous waste of time. When I was a schoolboy, in those bad old days when children were taught penmanship, one of the aphorisms I sometimes had to write as an exercise (and sometimes as an imposition for misconduct) went as follows:-

"Lost, somewhere between sunrise and sunset, one golden hour, studded with sixty diamond minutes. No reward is offered for it has gone forever."

It will also be noted that the two-foot rule, in its usual form, is folded into four equal lengths. We are told that the proper uses of the hours of the day are four-fold - "Prayer, Labor, Refreshment and Sleep". We must not, of course, be too literal, and I do not really think we are admonished to spend, each day, six hours praying on our knees, six hours at the office or shop, six at the dinner-table and six in bed! It does suggest, rather, the equal importance of all four of these functions in the proper use of our time and the making of the full Man. Nourishment of our bodies by refreshment and sleep; enlightenment of our minds by labor and prayer,. Real prayer! - not just "Please God gimme, gimme, gimme" on Sundays, but that prayerful attitude of mind in which, every hour of the day, we feel the Great

Architect at our shoulder, supervising and encouraging our work and ready to answer any true and sincere yearning for guidance and strength. And real labor! Not just putting in time at the office, shop, or whatever, but real all-out dedicated effort; for who has not experienced the job which comes when we put everything we've got, heart and soul, into a task which we know we can accomplish! Wholesome refreshment - food, drink, and entertainment taken with honest enjoyment, but without gluttony or lust; and finally, sleep - in Shakespeare's lovely words - "Sleep that knits up the raveled sleeve of Care"! and prepares us for the rich experience of another day.

So many lessons from this humble little tool!

(B) The Common Gavel.

Pursuing the same metaphor, it might be said that the second great gift with which we are endowed at our birth is the gift of energy. Healthy children simply bubble and boil with it (as we grandfathers know all too well!) and if it be true that, in the words of our ritual, "labor is the lot of man", then it is also true that our God-given energy is the means whereby we accept that lot, and wield the Gavel of our allotted tasks in life. To conserve the sources of our energy by right-living and temperate habits seems to me to be a duty implied, if not explicitly stated by the charge concerning the Common Gavel. As we pile on the years of our age, our energy becomes less overflowing, and sapped by normal fatigue, we become a set-up for one of the "Seven Deadly Sins" - Sloth, - or as we should now call it, Laziness, a tendency to procrastinate, to put off, or to neglect moral tasks which should go to the building of our character into a "a stately and superb Edifice, perfect in its parts and honorable to the builder."

Say, we have a kindly impulse to write a letter to a distant or lonely relative or friend, whose spirits we know would be lifted by a message from us. But - oh, well, I'm a bit fagged this evening and there's a very good program on the television. Or, say again, there is a meeting of some organization to which we belong, at which some special knowledge we possess would be a valuable help to the committee if we did but attend the meeting as we should; but, oh well, it's been a rough day at the office, and it's not a very nice night out, and anyway I might get stuck with a job to do! So, we let it go, and our reputation for dependability suffers! Which of us, alas, does not recall some good, kindly or helpful action which on first impulse we might have taken, but we have let time slip by, and the opportunity is lost. The Gavel was in our grasp, but we did not wield it! Truly, the road to Perdition is paved with good intentions. "For the heart may conceive and the head devise; in vain, if the hand be not prompt to execute the Design"!

(C) The Chisel.

The Chisel, whose principal characteristics (so says our Ritual), are its smallness and its sharpness; what gift at our birth can we think of as corresponding in its nature to the "diminutive implement of exquisite temper"? Our Ritual itself supplies the answer - Perseverance, that human quality which says "try, try, again"; which says "let's have another go, next time the results should be better"; that very human quality in us which is prepared to labor long and tediously for the sake of a fine end result.

Those of my brethren who have, by chance, watched the recent serialized television production of Thomas Hardy's classic novel "Jude the Obscure", will recall that the story is about a young stone-mason,

and that each television episode was introduced by a close-up of a stone-mason's hands surfacing a block of ashlar with chisel and gavel. Each blow with the gavel produces a short, precise movement of the chisel, and removes a tiny amount of material in working towards the final smooth surface.

Similarly, and symbolically, when considering the improvement of our characters as we travel through life, it is true that the rude material receives its fine finish by repeated efforts alone". The men we most admire are not, in the main, persons who have accomplished some great and spectacular feat of charity, bravery, or moral victory; but those whom we know as unfailingly kind and considerate in little things. Men who would never dream of a shabby act, even a small one. Men who, when angered or aroused, do not let slip the bitter, damaging, but irretrievable words, but bite their tongues, count to ten, and then either say something conciliatory, to help mend matters, or else say nothing at all. Such men are irresistible, for the Chisel of perseverance is "of such exquisite temper as to make an impression on all but the hardest substances" - and indeed it is a case-hardened character who is not ultimately influenced for good by the unfailing acts of courtesy and consideration of a man well-skilled in the use of Masonic tools. Such men are modest, but are well recognized in their community. When their name is mentioned, people, say, "Oh, everyone respects him," or "Oh, everyone seeks his advice," or perhaps, "Oh, you can always depend upon him!" But here in this "abode of friendship and brotherly love" we make use of a different phrase; we say "Ah yes, he is a Freemason!"

The working tools in the Fellowcraft Degree, so it appears to me, the Square, the Level, and the Plumb-rule, are intimately related one with the other, and all concern themselves with one basic moral quality - honesty. In the field of activity of the operative builder, architect, or engineer, these three implements are also intimately related one to the other, and concern themselves with a single technical quality - namely accuracy, precision, or truth. Lacking their aid it is not possible, so it seems to me, for the engineer to assemble a structure, or the builder to execute the design of his architect. Similarly, lacking these symbolic moral tools, and the standards of rectitude they represent, it is not possible for the Free and Accepted Mason to bring into reality in his life and great design laid down for us by the Grand Geometrician of the Universe. For, just as the physical instruments represent adherence to standards, the horizontal standard, the vertical standard, and the angle of ninety degrees between them, so the symbolic working tools of the Fellowcraft.