

THE SYMBOLISM OF THE GLOVES AND APRON

By V.W.Bro. L. Tustain; 24th June, 1948.

There is in the wearing of Craft Clothing, as in everything else pertaining to Freemasonry, a symbolism. Briefly, white gloves are symbolical of clean hands, and are complementary to the lambskin apron, the symbol of a pure heart. These two are of equal importance and are really inseparable.

White Gloves

The custom of wearing white gloves is of great antiquity. In the Christian Churches from the earliest times, white linen gloves were always worn by Bishops and Priests when in performance of their ecclesiastical functions. The Bishops always wore a thin plate of gold, called "a tassel" on the back of their gloves to denote their high ecclesiastical rank. The gloves worn by the clergy indicated that their hands were clean and not open to bribery.

In an indenture of covenants made in the reign of Henry VI between the churchwardens of a parish in Suffolk and a company of Freemasons, the latter stipulate that each man should be provided with a pair of white gloves and a white apron.

While we have no written proof, as far as I know, that our ancient Operative Brethren did moralise on the white gloves and apron after the manner of the working tools, there is nothing to show that they did not.

Dr. Robert Plot, a non-mason, states in his "Natural History of Staffordshire", 1686, that "the Society of Freemasons presented their candidates with white gloves for themselves and their wives."

In the general regulations of George Payne approved by the Grand Lodge in London in 1721, Article 7 reads: "Every new brother at his making is decently to cloath the Lodge, that is, all the brethren present," By 'clothing the Lodge' is meant furnishing all the brethren present with white aprons and gloves.

In Count Tolstoy's well-known novel "War and Peace", it states that "the newly-obligated brother was then invested with a white apron, and received a trowel and three pairs of white gloves, two pairs for himself and one pair for the lady he most esteemed, after which the Master explained their symbolic meaning to him."

In the Netherlands ritual the presentation of white gloves is still retained. The candidate for initiation is taken upon three journeys; after the second journey his hands are dipped in a basin of water, and a reference made to the necessity of "clean hands" and purity of heart and life as an essential pre-requisite to Initiation. On the completion of the third journey he takes the Ob., after which he is led to the West, where he is invested with a white apron, and is given a pair of white gloves, which he is directed to hand to her whom he considers most worthy to receive them from the hands of a Freemason.

I do not know when the presentation of white gloves ceased to be the general custom, but the wearing of them as part of the proper clothing of a brother is still retained in New Zealand by ruling of the Board of General Purposes.

To-day, the Supreme Court Judge is presented with a pair of white gloves if there is a maiden session. This indicates "clean actions" or freedom from crime in that particular city. This is a very old custom, for anciently, judges were not allowed to wear gloves on the bench; so to give a judge a pair of gloves symbolised that he need not take his seat.

Undoubtedly, the use of white gloves in Freemasonry is a symbolic idea handed down to us through the ancient and universal language of symbolism, and, like the apron, is intended to denote purity of life and action.

The White Lambskin Apron

In the Masonic apron two things are essential for the preservation of its symbolic character, its colour and the material.

Its colour must be white, because that colour denotes Purity, Simplicity and Candor, Innocence, Truth and Hope. The Ancient Druids, and the Priests generally of antiquity, used to wear white vestments when they officiated in any sacred

service. The white lambskin apron is, to us, a constant reminder of that purity of life and rectitude of conduct, of higher thoughts and nobler deeds, which are the distinguishing character of a Free and Accepted Mason.

The Material

The material must be lambskin, as our ritual informs us the "lamb has been from time immemorial an emblem of purity and innocence." Yes, Brethren, the dead lamb whose skin we now wear was pure and innocent, but its purity was physical, ours must be spiritual. To provide each of us with an apron, a lamb's life had to be sacrificed. We too must sacrifice a life if we would worthily wear this badge. We must kill self, for selfishness is the cause of all sins. Yes, we must give up every selfish propensity which may injure others. We must dedicate and devote our lives to His service, and endeavour to become more extensively serviceable to our fellow creatures. The lamb's sacrifice entailed "death" ours ~ the most supreme ~ demands a "life", a life of self-sacrifice spent in the service of others, and that service to be given freely, without any thought of reward or recognition. Remember: It is not how we die, but how we live that counts.

The Investiture

The presentation of the apron signifies that the Lodge has accepted us as a worthy brother. It now entrusts to our care its distinguishing badge and with it, and symbolised by it, comes one of the most precious and gracious gifts, the gift of brotherhood, a brotherhood founded upon the Fatherhood of God. Remember, this brotherhood is dependant upon the manhood of the brother.

The apron is Freemasonry's first and last material and tangible gift to its members. It is also the first emblem that is explained to them. No other gift that mere man can bestow can equal it in honour and dignity, now or in the future.

It is also the Badge of Equality, for Freemasonry regards the man, not his rank, or social or financial position. Freemasonry ordains that all its members shall be clothed alike. The lambskin apron is the clothing in which Freemasonry dresses

up. We stand before God and man equal with one another and whatever may be our future advancement in the Craft, with the lambskin apron we never part; it follows us into the grave, when all are equal in His sight.

Investiture Charge

During the presentation the brother is informed that this badge "is more ancient than the golden fleece," etc. These words are used simply to impress upon the newly-made brother the value and importance of the lambskin as a universal and age old symbol. It does not claim that the Masonic apron is more ancient than the orders mentioned, but that the symbolic apron generally, is far, far older than the oldest order in existence. We know that centuries before the birth of speculative masonry, the Hebrew prophets wore aprons, and the High Priests were so decorated. In the mysteries of Egypt and India aprons were worn as symbols of priestly power.

The statement that our apron "is more honourable than the garter." etc., at first appears to be a bold and sweeping one to make. Yet it is true, but only when it is worn in strict compliance with the qualifying conditions mentioned in the funeral service. "When worthily worn it is more honourable," etc. Yes, brethren, what can be more honourable than a life well spent in acts of piety and virtue, a life governed by the three grand principles upon which our order is founded, B~ L~, R and T~? What can be more dishonourable than to clothe ourselves with this bond of friendship whilst entertaining feelings of animosity against a brother? We cannot plead ignorance, for the advice and instruction given in the charge after investiture are clear and distinct. If we ignore that advice we disgrace ourselves and not the badge.

In conclusion, I need scarcely remind you that we, as Free and Accepted Masons, make no claim to having attained to a state of perfection. Nevertheless perfection must be the constant aim of those who are privileged to wear the lambskin apron and the white gloves of the Craft.

By V.W.Bro. L. Tustain, P.G.Lec., P.M.; 24th June, 1948;
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King Solomon Lodge, No. 58, GRS

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