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COMMENTARY ON THE FIRST DEGREE

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FOREWORD

As an approach to an understanding and interpretation of its Symbolism let us consider the generally accepted and classical definition to Freemasonry: "A beautiful system of morality, veiled in allegory, and illustrated by symbols." There can hardly be any doubt in the mind of the candidate, on the completion of his initiation, that F.M. is a beautiful system of morality, but this positive statement is qualified by the last two phrases "veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols." In the course of the ceremony certain symbolic meanings were given to symbols employed such as the W.T.'s, G.L.'s etc., but special attention should be given to the central phrase "veiled in allegory." The Oxford Dictionary defines an allegory as a "Narrative description of a subject under guise of another suggestively similar" and this definition is truly applicable to our Masonic Ceremonies.

They have two distinct meanings, an exoteric or obvious one and an esoteric or mystical one. There is therefore much more in the Masonic Ritual than appears on the surface, and deeper meanings than the strictly literal ones. It is for the true Mason (each one) to endeavour to discover the key to an understanding of the mystical meaning of our rites and ceremonies. In the matter of interpretation there is no authority to whom we can refer, as no one has yet been able to comprehend the full meaning back of our allegorical presentations, nor words enough to give expression to it. The author of this treatise therefore does not speak as the "voice of authority" but is offering his own ideas and those of noted Masonic scholars which to him appear reasonable and worthy of acceptance.

THE CANDIDATE AND HIS ADMISSION

When the preliminary requirements have been complied with a favourable report from the Investigating Committee, and a ballot taken favourable to the candidate, it would appear that the way is now open for his admission into the Order. But such is not the case. He must appear before a Board of Trial and answer some definite and searching questions. Regardless of what has gone before, it is only after sincere and convincing answers in the affirmative that he can be prepared for his reception into the First or E.A. Degree. It might here be observed that when the candidate has given an affirmative answer to the first question asked of him, he is, though unconsciously, subscribing to and giving his assent to the First "Landmark" as adopted in this jurisdiction. A word of caution might here be injected. Care should be observed that the questions are not asked in a mere matter of form but designed to secure from the candidate a definite and sincere declaration of his faith.

The whole preparation of the candidate is to emphasize that it is the internal and not the external qualities he possesses that recommend his

admission among Free Masons. Stripped of all material and worldly advantage he stands before the door of the Lodge, craving admission, the tongue of good report and his own moral worth being his only recommendations. The manner of his reception is intended to caution him against rashness; not to rush forward thoughtlessly but to proceed carefully, humbly but resolutely and with purpose; not disdainng but welcoming the guiding hand at his side. Should there be lurking in the back of the candidate's mind any idea that some trick or practical joke is to be perpetrated on him, such idea must surely be dispelled when he kneels and hears from the lips of the Chaplain that devout prayer. While in this devout posture he is called upon to make his second declaration of faith. Thus early in the ceremony the candidate is impressed with two essentials - belief in God and trust in G if he would step forward onto the "Way of Life" with confidence and hope; that way at the moment being shrouded in darkness.

CIRCUMAMBULATION

The claim of Freemasonry to antiquity would indicate that many of our rites and ceremonies are derived from, based on, or influenced by, religious ceremonies of antiquity. Among these is the Rite of Circumambulation which consisted in a procession around an altar or some other sacred object. In making this procession great care was taken to move in imitation of the sun. It commenced in the East and proceeding by the way of the South to the West and thence by the North back to the East again. In such a circumambulation the right side was always nearest the Altar. This procession with the right side nearest the Altar indicated reverence for the Gods. This rite was adopted by Freemasons, symbolizing the Sun as the source of physical light and the most glorious work of the G.A.O.T.U.

It is symbolical of the "Pilgrimage of Life" referred to in our ritual and illustrates the candidates progress from intellectual darkness or ignorance to intellectual light or Truth. This rite as we practice it today indicates that not only the spoken word but the movements of the officers, members and candidates on the floor of the Lodge are intended to teach wise and serious truths. In moving around the Lodge in such a manner that the Altar is always nearest the right hand is expressive of reverence for the G.A.O.T.U. It might here be noted that in this symbolical journey the candidate's guide is always between him and the Altar, because he, the candidate, is still in darkness and unable to appreciate the significance of the ceremony. Before leaving this portion of the ceremony, attention might be brought to the three passages of scripture recited during the three circuits. Too often it would appear that their significance is lost to the candidate by an indifferent rendition on the part of the officers, or as a result of the candidate being in motion during their rendition.

A reasonable interpretation of these passages might be "Happiness and contentment on the 'Way of Life' comes to the man who lives in harmony and unity with his brethren, such harmony and unity being the outcome of a character built under the inspiration, guidance and direction of the G.A.O.T. U., and in the consciousness that he is always, in his comings and goings, under the beneficent, watchful and loving regard of the All-seeing eye". The candidate is still on probation. Caution demands that he again, through his guide, give assurance of his worthiness and that he is what he represents himself to be. Hence a repetition of the two W's of the answers given at the door of the Lodge when seeking admission. Even after the S.W. HAS CERTIFIED AS TO HIS QUALIFICATIONS the W.M. is again guided by caution, calling upon the candidate to answer some questions, already answered in his intentions, his high regard for the Fraternity, and an earnest of his future conduct, the real ceremony of his initiation can then begin and the S.W IS ACCORDINGLY CALLED UPON TO INSTITUTE THIS CEREMONY.

With the D's instructions to the C. begins the real ceremony of initiation. There are two very significant aspects to the sps. with which the candidate advances It will be remembered that each sp- was commenced with the l.f. The left side has always apparently for a well known reason been deemed inferior to the right, or the weaker or vulnerable side. The right side is the side of honour. To the ancients left and unlucky or inauspicious were synonymous. The left side being vulnerable, it is the side from which evil would naturally attack To meet and ward off this attack the combatant would naturally advance with the lf. Evil, for countless ages has been represented as a serpent or reptile lurking in darkness to strike, and ancient gods and medieval knights in their battles to conquer evil, when victorious, have been depicted with the l.f. on the neck of the serpent or reptile. Symbolically then, the first thing required in the advance towards light is to tread Evil underfoot. Some maintain that the first sp. is emblematic of the C's good intentions which by employing the rf. is squared into rectitude of conduct. Good intentions alone are not sufficient, but must be crystallized into right conduct.

Another significant feature of these sps. is that there is a definite measurement associated with each. Before the days of graduated rules and gauges, steps were considered units of measurement as well as a means of movement from one location to another. Even today in certain particulars, the hand, the span, the pace and the ell are used as units of measurement. For instance the height of a horse is measured by "hands" - not feet or inches. And as we hear from time to time, the instructions of the deacon to the candidate, we may recall our own puzzling mental query, "What do they mean? What am I supposed to do with them?" Only through a realization of the limitations imposed by darkness can come the revelation that there is light beyond the veil to him who will earnestly and persistently seek it. It is hardly just a matter of coincidence that these measurements are the same as those employed later on by the expert craftsman in demonstrating the mathematical proposition which we have described as "an important discovery of the learned Pythagoras".

Symbolically then, these first steps may be considered as the beginning of that important lesson which runs through all our Masonic teaching, viz., that from the darkness of ignorance man may rise by regular gradations to the summit of human achievement, physical, mental and moral.

SECRETS

Meredith Sanderson, a prominent Masonic Scholar, in a preface to his book "An examination of the Masonic Ritual", says in recalling the incidents of his initiation, "I recollect thinking that the solemnity of the obligation I had taken was disproportionate to the secrets which had been imparted to me." He described the state of his mind as "chaotic" which could no doubt be appropriated by most initiates. Many Masons look upon our Modes of Recognition as the only Masonic Secrets. But he who proceeds no further has not entered the recesses of Masonic teaching. It is true our Ritual gives a symbolical interpretation of these Modes of Recognition but this is of a limited nature. The temptation to attempt to enlarge on this symbolical interpretation is great but caution decrees that care be taken in discussing them lest one inadvertently disclose them to the profane. To the seeking mind it would not be amiss to suggest that he endeavour to trace each back to its origin or source of derivation and apply the original meaning and purpose to our present day interpretation Secrecy indicates value. That which has no value requires no secrecy in its possession. The important thing about our secrets is a realization of their value, to be shared only by those who are worthy, appreciate their value, and guard them jealously. Secrecy implies discovery, discovery calls for research, not intermittent but

persistent, and research establishes the right of the seeker to possession. And the final quest is Truth, Truth to the utmost of man's mental conception.

THE APRON

The use of the apron, masonically has been beautifully and strikingly illustrated in our ritual. However, the history of the apron dates back to antiquity. It was an important part of the vestments employed in the rites and ceremonies of the religions of antiquity and the ancient mysteries. Although the shape of the apron has undergone many changes down through the centuries in its various uses by religious bodies, organizations and cults, the upper part has in most, if not all cases, been triangular in form. Our Masonic aprons consist of two parts, the body of the apron being square, or nearly so, and the apex or flap triangular. Many Masonic scholars maintain that the square symbolizes the material world and this would include the physical of man, and the triangle is an emblem of the deity and the soul of man. The question has often been asked why is the apex or flap of the apron raised in the E.A. degree? The symbolical explanation is offered that the E.A. being a novice, the soul has not yet entered into or been imposed upon his physical nature, and while they are in contact, complete union has not yet been established.

The apron in the various degrees is described as a "distinguishing badge". It is a badge of trust and a symbol of capability. It indicates the nature and scope of the work with which he is to be entrusted and at the time imposes limitations which warn him not to presume to engage in work of a higher degree or office than that sanctioned by the apron he wears. The apron from that of the E.A. to that of the G.M. points out the nature, scope and limitations of the work in which the wearer may masonically engage and the authority (if any) with which he is invested.

THE NORTH EAST CORNER

To the ancients, not only was the earth flat, it was in the form of a rectangle or oblong square. They used their idea of the shape of the earth as a pattern to be followed in erecting their buildings and domiciles with the front facing due east as did the earth. The work day of the ancients lasted from dawn to dark and full advantage was taken of the hours of daylight. During the summer solstice the days were naturally longest and in this period the sun rose in the North East and not due east. The first rays of the rising sun would fall on the North East corner of the building under construction, or its ground plan. The northeast corner, therefore, became a logical starting point in their building plans. It was there the corner stone was laid and the rest of the building aligned with it.

The Lodge being considered a representation of the earth, the N.E. corner is significant. It is the point at which darkness and light meet and where darkness recedes before the light. Symbolically it is here that the candidate comes under the first rays of enlightenment which he had previously declared was the predominant wish of his heart. It is here that he symbolically lays the corner stone portraying integrity and stability of conduct, truthfulness and uprightness of character and purity and holiness of life, and each duty he learns, and each new virtue he practices become living stones in his moral and Masonic Temple, each in accurate alignment with the corner stone he has laid. And as he advances toward the fuller light as represented by the East and South his mystical temple grows in extent, strength and beauty. Among the many virtues stressed by Masonry that of charity is a prominent feature of its teachings. It is not surprising, therefore, "in putting the principles of the candidate to the test" that the exercise of it has been selected as a medium to that

end. Of the many principles and virtues promulgated by our Craft it is probably the only one to which tangible expression can be given. It is significant however that when called upon to exercise this virtue by a material contribution, the candidate is unable to comply. Such inability once again emphasizes that man's internal qualifications transcend the external or material ones. It shows that motive is paramount to act. It teaches that the exercise of this virtue, worthy though it be, cannot by itself discharge all of man's moral obligations to himself or his fellow man.

FINAL ADMONITION

The last admonition given the candidate is "to make a daily advancement in Masonic knowledge". It is only by an earnest endeavour to draw aside "the veil that shrouds our secrets from the vulgar eye" that this can be accomplished.

Montreal, August 7th, 1950
