

Book on the Altar

I HEARD the most curious tale," began the New Brother seating himself beside the Old Tiler during refreshment.

"Shoot!" commanded the Old Tiler.

"Friend of mine belongs to a midwest lodge. Seems they elected a chap to become a member but when he took the degree he stopped the work to ask for the Koran in place of the Bible on the Altar. Said he wanted the holy book of his faith, and the Bible wasn't it!"

"Yes, go on," prompted the Old Tiler. "What did they do?"

"The officers held a pow-wow and the Master finally decided that as the ritual demanded the 'Holy Bible, Square and Compasses' as furniture for the lodge, the applicant was wrong and that he'd have to use the Bible or not take his degree. And the funny part was that the initiate was satisfied and took his degree with the Bible on the Altar.

I'm glad they have him, and not this lodge."

Why?"

"Why, a chap who backs down that way can't have very much courage; I'd have had more respect for him if he'd insisted and if he couldn't have his way, refused to go on with the degree."

"All wrong, brother, all wrong!" commented the Old Tiler. "The Mohammedan initiate wasn't concerned about himself but about the lodge. He showed a high degree of Masonic principle in asking for his own holy book, and a great consideration for the lodge. This man isn't a Christian. He doesn't believe in Christ. He believes in Allah, and Mohammed his prophet. The Bible, to you a holy book, is to him no more than the Koran is to you. You wouldn't regard an obligation taken on a dictionary or a cookbook or a Koran as binding, in the same degree that you would one taken on the Bible.

"That's the way this chap felt. He wanted to take his obligation so that it would bind his conscience. The Master would not let him, because he slavishly followed the words of the ritual instead of the spirit of Masonry.

"Masonry does not limit an applicant to his choice of a name for a Supreme Being. I can believe in Allah, or Buddha, or Confucius, or Mithra, or Christ, or Siva, or Brahma, or Jehovah, and be a good Mason. If I believe in a Great Architect that is all Masonry demands; my brethren do not care what I name Him."

"Then think you this chap isn't really obligated? I must write my friend and warn him-

"Softly, softly! Any man with enough reverence for Masonry, in advance of knowledge of it, to want his own holy book on which to take an obligation would feel himself morally obligated to keep his word, whether there was his, another's or no holy book at all, on the Altar. An oath is not really binding because of the book beneath your hand. It is the spirit with which you assume an obligation which makes it binding. The book is but a symbol that you make your promise in the presence of the God you revere. The cement of brotherly love which we spread is not material-the working tools of a Master Mason are not used upon stone but upon human hearts. Your brother did his best to conform to the spirit of our usages in asking for the book he had been taught to revere. Failing in that through no fault of his own, doubtless he took his obligation with a sincere belief in its sacredness. Legally he would not be considered to commit perjury if he asked for his own book and was forced to use another."

"What's the law got to do with it?"

"Just nothing at all, which is the point I make. In England and America, Canada and South America, Australia, and part of the Continent, the Bible is universally used. In Scottish Rite bodies you will find many holy books; but let me ask you this; when our ancient brethren met on hills and in valleys, long before Christ, did they use the New Testament on their altars? Of course not; there was none. You can say that they used the Old Testament and I can say they used a Talmud and someone else can say they used none at all, and all of us are as right as the other. But they used a reverence for sacred things.

"If you write your friend, you might tell him that the ritual which permits a man to name his God as he pleases, but demands that a book which reveres one particular God be used, is faulty. The ritual of Masonry is faulty; it was made by man. But the spirit of Masonry is divine; it comes from men's hearts. If obligation and books and names of the Deity are matters of the spirit, every condition is satisfied. If I were Master and an applicant demanded any one or any six books on which to lay his hand while he pledged himself to us, I'd get them if they were to be had, and I'd tell my lodge what a reverent Masonic spirit was in the man who asked."

"Seems to me you believe in a lot of funny things; how many gods do you believe in?"

"There is but one," was the Old Tiler's answer, "Call Him what you will. Let me repeat a little bit of verse for you:

'At the Meuzzin's call for prayer
The kneeling faithful thronged the square;
Amid a monastery's weeds,
An old Franciscan told his beads,
While on Pushkara's lofty height
A dark priest chanted Brahma's might,
While to the synagogue there came
A Jew, to praise Jehovah's Name.

The One Great God looked down and smiled
And counted each His loving child;
For Turk and Brahmin, monk and Jew
Had reached Him through the gods they knew.'

"If we reach Him in Masonry, it makes little difference by what sacred name we arrive,"
finished the Old Tiler, reverently.

"You've reached me, anyhow," said the New Brother, shaking hands as if he meant it.