

The Level and the Plumb

Author Unknown

Before you could become a Fellowcraft it was demanded of you that you become proficient in the work of the First Degree; that you learn “by heart” a certain portion of the Ritual, and make yourself competent to “stand and deliver” it on occasion.

Such a memorization is the sole survival of that ancient custom of Operative Masonry of demanding from the Apprentice, who had served the legal time (usually seven years), a Master’s Piece; and example of ability in Masonry by which his fellows could judge whether or no he had made good use of his time and was fit to be “passed” from the state of being but an Apprentice, to that of being a Fellow (or companion) of the Craft.

Alas, that our modern Master’s Piece is so modest in its required effort! For it takes no one very long, nor does it make much of a drain upon time or patience, to “learn the words” by heart. Lucky is he whose instructor is not content with teaching him just the words and their order, but who insists upon instructing as to their meaning and their history.

The modern Fellowcraft Degree is, as a whole, emblematical of manhood; to attain is to be grown up, Masonically speaking. As the entered Apprentice Degree speaks of birth and babyhood, of first beginnings and first principles, so does the degree of Fellowcraft speak of growth, of strength and of virility to those who have inward and spiritual ears with which to hear. No thoughtful man can avoid the impression that this degree is an attempt to emphasize the vital need of knowledge; to encourage study and research, to bring out the beauty of wisdom. It is true that the liberal education which the degree was once supposed to outline and encourage is no longer either liberal or educational in fact; but it is still symbolical of all that a good Mason should learn.

To understand the degree and what it attempts to do, one must have some knowledge of its history, and of William Preston, who brought the vigour of a trained mind to bear upon the often hasty and ill considered lectures with which it progenitors were given. He turned these lectures into the elaborate exposition of the five senses, the seven liberal arts and sciences which we now have. In Preston’s day such an exposition of knowledge was all inclusive; it is not Preston’s fault that he knew nothing of science as we know it; that he knew nothing of medicine or biology or archaeology or criticism, or electricity or astronomy in the modern sense. There are those who would substitute for the Prestonian Lectures and the Prestonian-Webb form of the degree, wholly modern exposition of the obtaining of knowledge. With such as these we have nothing to do; our Fellowcraft Degree is hallowed with age, and it is a lovely thing to do as have all those good brothers and fellows who have gone this way before us. But there is nothing to prevent us from reading the degrees symbolically. We do not have to accept it as literal, any more than we have to accept the first verse of the seventh chapter of Revelations:

“And after these things I saw four Angels standing on the four corners of the earth...”

as proof that the earth is square and not round. We can consider the meaning of the degree, and govern ourselves accordingly. And if we do so, we will start now, at once, to make ourselves earnest students not only of Masonic knowledge, but of knowledge in general. For of knowledge and its obtaining, this degree is most certainly a teacher; from the time of entry through the West Gate until the finish of the lecture, the entered Apprentice in the process of being “passed” is instructed, taught, given knowledge and urged that only by knowledge can he hope to obtain complete growth and the final glory of Masonry and of life, the Sublime degree of Master Mason.

The most outstanding symbol in the degree of Fellowcraft is the Flight of Winding Stairs. In the Book of Kings we find; “They Went up With Winding Stairs into the Middle Chamber.” We go up “with winding stairs” into “The Middle Chamber of King Solomon’s Temple.” Also we travel up a winding stairs of life, and arrive, if we climb steadfastly, at the middle chamber of existence, which is removed from birth, babyhood and youth by the steps of knowledge and experience, but which is not so high above the ground that we are not as yet of the earth, earthy; not so high that we can justifiably regard it as more than a Stepping Off Place from which we may, perhaps, ascend to the Sanctum Sanctorum; that Holy of Holies, in which our troubled spirits find rest, our ignorance finds knowledge, and our eyes see God.

There is a symbolism in the fact that the stairway “Winds.” A straight stairway is not as easy to climb as a winding one, which, because of the fact that it does wind, ascends by easier stages than one which climbs as a ladder. But, also, a straight stair has the goal in sight constantly, and while it may be more difficult in the effort and strength required, it is easier because one can see where one is going. There is no faith needed in climbing a ladder; one can visualize the top and have its inspiration constantly before one as one rises rung after rung.

But the winding stairway is one which tries a man’s soul. He must “Believe,” or he cannot reach the top. Nothing is clear before him but the next step. He must take it on faith that there is a top, that if he but climb long enough he will, indeed, reach a middle chamber, a goal, a place of light. In such a way are the Winding Stairs and the Middle Chamber symbols of life and manhood. No man knows what he will become; as a boy he may have a goal, but many reach other Middle Chambers than those they visualized as they started the ascent. No man knows whether he will ever climb all the stairs; the Angel of Death may stand but around the corner on the next step. Yet, in spite of a lack of knowledge of what is at the top of the stairs, in spite of the fact that a Flaming Sword may bar his ascent, man climbs. He climbs in faith that there is a goal and that he shall reach it; and no good Mason doubts but that for those who never see the glory of the Middle Chamber in this life, a lamp is set that they may see still farther in another, better one.

We are taught that we should use that which God gave us, the five senses, to climb the remaining seven steps of the stairway, which are the seven liberal arts and sciences. Again we must remember that William Preston, who put such a practical interpretation upon these steps, lived in an age when these did indeed represent all of knowledge. But we must not refuse to grow because the ritual has not grown with modern discovery. When we rise by Grammar and Rhetoric, we must consider that they mean not only language but all methods of communication. The step of logic means a knowledge not only of all methods of reasoning, but of all reasoning which logicians have accomplished. When we ascend by

Arithmetic and Geometry, we must visualize all science; since science is but measurement, and all measurement in the true mathematical sense, it requires no great stretch of the imagination to read into these two steps all that science may teach. The step denominated Music means not only sweet and harmonious sounds, but all beauty; poetry, art, nature, loveliness of whatever kind. Not to familiarize himself with the beauty which nature provides is to be, by so much, less a man; to stunt, by so much, a striving soul. As for the seventh step of astronomy, surely it means not only the study of the solar system and the stars, as it did in William Preston's day, but also the study of all that is beyond the earth; of spirit and the world of spirit, of ethics, philosophy, the abstract... of deity.

Preston builded better than he knew; his seven steps are both logical in arrangement and suggestive in their order; the true Fellowcraft will see in them a guide to the making of a man rich in mind and spirit, by which, and only by which riches, can the truest brotherhood be obtained and practiced.

The Fellowcraft Degree is one of action. Recall, if you will, where you wore your Cable-Tow; but think not that it confines action; it urges it. A great authority has stated that the words come from the Hebrew, and mean, effect "his pledge." Here, then "His Pledge" is for action, for a doing, a girding up, an effort to be made. What effort? To climb, to rise! How? By the use of the five senses to take in and make Knowledge a part of the mind and heart. What Knowledge? All Knowledge!

Conceived thus, the Fellowcraft Degree, from being a mere ceremony, a stepping stone from the Apprentice Degree to that of the Master, becomes something sublime; it is emblematic of the struggle of life, not materially, but spiritually, and it is a symbol with high hope and encouragement constantly held forth. There "is" a Middle Chamber; the steps "do" lead somewhere; man "can" climb them if he will. Not for the drone, the laggard, the journeyer by the easy paths upon the level, but for the fighter, the adventurer, the man with courage. For that which is not worth working for and fighting for is not worth having. It is no easy journey that we make through life, and it is no easy journey that we make through the mazes of this degree. In its Middle Chamber lecture are profound philosophies, deep truths, great facts concealed. He who is a true Fellowcraft will study these for himself; he will not be content with the Prestonian lecture as an end; it will be to him but a means.

For thousands of years men saw the rainbow and the best they could do was call it a promise of God. So, indeed, it may be to us all, but it is also a manifestation of beauty in nature, it is caused by the operation of well-understood laws, and when artificially produced in the spectroscope, it is the key with which we unlocked the mysteries of the heavens. For as long as man has lived upon this earth the lightning has flashed and the thunder roared to no end but terror and beauty. In the last few hundred years man has read the first part of the mysterious story of electricity and taken for himself the power God put in nature. Had man been content merely with what he saw and heard he would still be as ignorant as the beasts of the field.

So should the mysteries of the Fellowcraft be to you, my brother. It is but a great symbol, given in one evening, of all that a man may make of his life. It is a lamp to guide your feet; not, as Preston would have had it, both the feet and the path. Preston and his brethren were Speculative Masons, indeed, but we are enlightened as he never was; so that if we fail to

use the light he lit, or see by its radiance a greater Stairway and a higher climb than ever he visualized, the fault is within us, and not in our opportunity.

There are thousands who pass through this degree who see in it only a ceremony, just as there are thousands who see in a rainbow only the color in the sky, thousands who see a lightening flash only as a portent of danger. Be you not one of these! Do you see the Winding Star an invitation, an urge to climb, to learn, to know, to reach that Middle Chamber of your life from which you can look back on an effort well made, a life well spent, a goal well won; and then forward... to what awaits you in the final degree? For the Sublime Degree of Master Mason, to which you aspire and which one day may be granted you, is a symbol, too... perhaps the greatest symbol man has ever made for himself to point a way up a yet greater Winding Stair to a more vaulted Upmost Chamber, where the real Master Mason, raised from a Fellowcraft, may reach up as a little child, and touch the hand of God!

- END -