

Ashlars; Rough, Smooth - Story Of A Stone

By J. Fairbairn Smith

Ware pleased to present this paper prepared by the eminent Masonic Scholar, J. Fairbairn Smith, Editor Emeritus of the Detroit Masonic World. Raised as a "Lewis" at the age of 18, in the lodge at Hawick, Scotland, in 1925, Bro. Smith has become one of the most respected of Masonic journalists. He is a "mould stone" from the quarry of Masonic life.

An eminent sculptor was once asked: "How do you carve such beautiful statues?" He replies, "It is the simplest thing in the world. I take a hammer and chisel and from a massive, shapeless rock, I knock off all the stone I do not want, and there is the statue. It was there all the time."

In every Masonic Lodge room there is, or should be, the Rough Ashlar and the Perfect Ashlar. These two and the Trestle Board constitute our Movable Jewels. What is their significance? What do they have to do with Masonry?

In our monitorial work we are taught that the Rough Ashlar "is a stone as taken from the quarry in its rude and natural state" and that the Perfect Ashlar "is a stone made ready by the hands of the workman, to be adjusted by the working tools of the Fellow Craft." The Rough Ashlar was not a stone that was merely picked up somewhere. It was a stone that has been selected. Some work was done upon it. It was apparently a good stone. It was a stone that showed good prospects of being capable of being made into a Perfect Ashlar. If it had not been a good stone, it would never have been cut out from the quarry.

So it is with our prospective member. He cannot be merely picked up somewhere. He must be selected. Before he is ready to be initiated some work must be done upon him. He must stand certain basic tests. He must be apparently of good material. He must be a man who shows good prospects of being capable of being made into a good Mason. If he had not been a good man, he should never have been proposed for membership.

In changing a Rough Ashlar into a Perfect Ashlar, the workman takes away and never adds to. He chips and chips. He cuts away the rough edges. He removes the visible flaws, he does not create by chemical means or otherwise, a new material. He takes that which is already there and develops it into the Perfect Ashlar.

The stone from which the Venus de Milo was carved by an unknown sculptor of ancient times, lay since the beginning of time in the rocks of the Island Milo. A common, unknown workman may have cut a huge piece of marble from the quarry. But it took a master artisan to carve out the beautiful statue. It took a good piece of marble and a skilled artist to produce the Venus de Milo.

Not many operators in Masonry can make a Perfect Ashlar. So there are not many perfect Masons in our Lodges. In our Ritualistic and other work, we can take away much of the roughness, remove the sharp points and obliterate the visible defects. We can produce as good a Mason as there is within our power to produce. But the essential thing is to have a good material upon which to work.

This statement is applicable to all mankind, but to us as Symbolic Masons, it is pregnant with meaning, for, was not each one, at the commencement of his Masonic career, placed in the Northeast corner as an example stone, in the hope that the stone so placed would, in the fullness of time, be wrought into a thing of beauty acceptable to the builder?

What does the poet say of the stone? Isn't it strange that Princes and Kings And clowns that caper in sawdust rings, And common folks like you and me Are builders for eternity? Each is given a kit of tools, A shapeless mass and a book of rules: And each must make, ere life is flown; A stumbling block or a stepping stone.

These are very true words. The kit of tools are those talents with which God has blessed us to enable us to fulfill our mission in life. We are told in the Volume of the Sacred Law that one man received five talents, another, two talents, and yet another, only one talent, so that our duty is for each to discharge his allotted task to the best of his ability, and help those who have not been so well blessed as himself. Thus each will be assisted in carving out the "Grand Design" of being happy and communicating happiness and thereby of being more "extensively serviceable to his fellow creatures."

The shapeless mass is a man's character, and each one of us is his own Architect, Builder and Material, and like our predecessors, the Operative Masons, we each must show our craftsmanship in working out a perfect "Ashlar" fit to be tried by the square of his own conscience.

The book of rules is the V.S.L. "That great light that will guide us to all truth, direct our steps in the path of happiness, and thus, point out the whole duty of man."

Let us pause for a moment and earnestly ask ourselves, which are we making--stumbling block or a stepping stone? If a man's life is such that he cannot "join in the grand design of being happy and communicating happiness to others," then he is a stumbling block, not only to himself, but to all those with whom he is associated. If that man is a Freemason he should study the ritual and discover the inner meaning, so that he can learn to perfect his stone.

Let us trace whence comes this perfect stone. An ancient charge provides that a mould stone shall be given to a visiting Operative Mason to enable him to demonstrate his craftsmanship. The stones were selected individual stones from the quarries to suit the requirement of the material building. As Speculative Masons, we obtain our mould stones from the quarries of life. Thus, when we receive an application for admission to our Lodge it is our duty to carefully scrutinize all the credentials of the applicant from every angle, so that only approved material is admitted to the Craft.

Freemasonry can and does improve good material, but it cannot make bad material good. As with the Operative Mason, poor material would have endangered the material structure. So with us as Speculative Masons, a faulty Ashlar will endanger the Spiritual temple we are endeavoring to build.

Having found, by the strictest inquiry, that the applicant, or mould stone, is suitable, we have, by those inquiries, knocked off some of the irregularities which surrounded him, and after his initiation, he is represented as the "rough Ashlar," that is, the stone is no longer the mould stone, but it is approximately a cube which still requires a considerable amount of "dressing" before the "perfect Ashlar" which is within it can be brought to light, and the candidate is given him to "knock off rough knobs and evanescence," of his character.

Later on he finds that, although the common gavel and chisel are suitable for reducing the roughness they are not capable of achieving perfection. As a Craftsman he receives another set of working tools, one of which is essential to perfection, namely, the square, and here he learns that it is only by continual grinding and many applications of the square that the stone can be brought to a true die, or cube.

In his capacity as a Craftsman and as a man of the world, he is continually coming into contact with his fellows and he learns to control his passions and to recognize the rights of others, with the result that the stone he is working upon, namely, his character, is gradually taking shape as a perfect Ashlar.

Later, he is called upon to hand his stone over to the Builder, who cuts a beveled hole at the top, so that the stone can be attached to a lewis and be hoisted up ready to be placed on the base assigned to it by the Builder. Thus, he is reminded that the rope, the lewis, and the crane represent the all sustaining power of God, and that if he has discharged his duty faithfully and in accordance with the precepts laid down in the V.S.L., he may rest assured that when his final summons comes he will find that the great Builder will have prepared a place for him in that "Great Spiritual Temple not made with hands eternal in the Heavens."

Finally, let us consider this "perfect Ashlar" from a geometric point of view. Looking at the perfect "Ashlar," as it stands in the Lodge we notice that it has six equal and exactly similar sides, and that no matter how it is placed down, on the level, it must stand on one of its faces and present a similar face to the observer, from any point of view. It is the only geometrical

body which requires no support from its fellows, but when placed in line with similar cubes, demands it own space, and lines up with the others on top, bottom and sides.

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