

Sublime

By Unknown

Learned students of art have discovered that the word "Sublime" as applied to the degree of Master Mason is not one of those matters which are of an antiquity of "Time Immemorial." It seems to have made its appearance in print first about 1801. Today, its use is practically universal.

That the degree "Is" sublime, in all the highest meanings of that much abused word, is not a matter for discussion or proof; it is sublime if we feel it as sublime; it is just an ordinary ceremony if that is all it is to us. Sublimity is not in the thing, but in us.

The Forty-Seventh Problem of Euclid in its absolute perfection is sublime to a mathematician, to a six year old child or a savage who cannot count beyond ten, it is less than nothing. The most beautiful sunset which ever thrilled the senses of color could not be sublime to a blind man, nor can harmonies of Beethoven or Wagner be sublime to a man born deaf. If the Master Mason degree is sublime, it is because of what it is and what it does to a man's heart.

The Master Mason's degree is immensely different from the two preceding ones. It has the same externals as far as entry and closing are concerned; it uses also a circumambulation, a passage from Scripture, has an obligation and a bringing to more light – "All The Light Which Can Be Communicated To You In A Blue Lodge." But its second section departs utterly from the architectural symbolism of the first two degrees, and concerns itself with a living, a dying and a living again. It is at once more human and more spiritual than the preceding degrees. It strikes in upon the heart with the force and effect of a great bell, heard in a silent place; no thoughtful man receives, or ever sees this degree, with any understanding of its symbolism, who does not feel a sense of awe and wonder that a mind of man could conceive it, put it together, place so much of wisdom in so simple a vehicle, give so much light in so few words and in so short a time.

The Master's degree as whole is a symbol of old age; of wisdom and experience. It is a symbol of preparation for that other life which it so grandly promises. It brings to the initiate the symbolism of the Sprig of Acacia, and tells him in one breath that a man must stand alone, even while he must lean upon the Everlasting Arms. It lays before him the whole drama of man's longing for a Something Beyond; it tells the tale of what ignorance and brute strength may do to

destroy knowledge and virtue, even while it shows that, never can darkness overcome light, never can evil win over what is good, never can error prevail over truth.

There are those who find in the symbolism of the Third Degree a promise of the resurrection of the body. None can blame them; the symbolism is there. Nor can one blame the miner who digs in the earth after the outcroppings of an ore, for believing that the ore is all he can expect to find; even when a later delver in the earth goes through the ore and finds a diamond. If, to a devout and orthodox Christian the Master Mason degree is symbolic of the resurrection of the body, that doctrine of bodily resurrection is in itself a symbol of a spiritual raising. Each of us, then, may interpret this part of the degree in according to the light which is given him, and no man has either the wisdom or the right to say, "That Interpretation is True, This One False."

There have been some twenty or more interpretations of the whole degree; they range all the way from the story of the Garden of Eden to a sort of cipher drama of the violent death of King Charles the First. Modern students, however, are reasonably well agreed that the Hiramic Legend is a retelling of the immortality of the soul; it belongs with the story of Isis and Orsiris, and the most beautiful of the early religious myths, the Brahmanic story of Ademi and Heva. Thus interpreted, the soul, mind or spirit; after it acquires knowledge, is subjected to temptation. It must bargain with conditions, make a pact with evil, compromise with reality, or suffer. Every life demonstrates the truth of this; we are all tempted to compromise with the best that is in us for the sake of expediency. Not infrequently, we, as did a Certain Three, think to win knowledge, power, place, and reward for themselves; not by patient effort, but by force alone.

In the sublime degree there is no compromise. Those who seek unlawfully are bidden to wait until they are found worthy . . . but there is no suggestion of yielding to their importunity if they will not. Nor do they wait. For a time it appears that force is superior to righteousness, that evil can overcome good. But only for a time. And while, indeed, That Which Was Lost has never been recovered, yet the manner of its losing has been an inspiration to all men in their search for it ever since; a just retribution overtook the evil and the consequences of wrong doing are set forth unequivocally.

It is difficult to write about that which is sublime, translate it into words of everyday, and at the same time comply with the statutory requirements. All Master Masons will forgive the seeming vagueness of these references; indeed, they should not find them vague. But in any attempt to translate the symbolism into words, it loses in two ways; first, as any symbol must lose (can you describe a rose so that it appears beautiful or put the majesty of a mountain or the magnitude of the ocean in a phrase?); second, because the appeal of the symbol is to the heart, the soul or the spirit; when one attempts to make of it also an appeal to the mind, the spirit symbolism becomes clouded over with materiality; the bloom is gone from the petal; the butterfly is crushed.

The moral lessons in the degree are many; the virtue of loyalty is most obvious and, perhaps, least important, symbolically. That truth wins in the end; that evil does not flourish; that

strength of heart is greater than strength of arm; that it is by the spirit of brotherhood, not by one man alone, that which has fallen can be raised; that in his greatest extremity man has but One to Whom to turn; that beyond brotherhood the soul stands always, and must always stand, alone before God, when no prayers save its own may avail; That he who would win true brotherhood must give proof of his fitness to be a brother; these, and many more can be read from the degree by the most casual minded.

But there is a deeper lesson, for him who is minded to dig far enough. There are certain matters which can be proved by logic, and by experiment. Thus, we know not only by vision, by experience and by counting on the fingers that two added to two make four, but also by demonstrating this fact by mathematics.

It is entirely obvious to all scientists that the laws of nature are constant; they do not vary between here and there. But it is not demonstrable! We are confident that the laws of motion and gravitation as we see them demonstrated on earth and in the solar system, are the same in some far off planet of an unknown sun, in some other solar system of the existence of which we do not even know. But we cannot prove it.

In this sense we cannot prove either God or Immortality. A God who could be proved to a finite mind by a finite means would be a finite God, and The Great Architect we believe to be infinite. The crux of the whole controversy between those who profess a science and those who profess a religion, has been over this demand on the part of those scientists that religion reduce God to figures and prove Him by a Rule; while the follower of a religion founded entirely on faith demands that the scientist forgo his reason and believe without proof!

In other words, one all Mind demands that one all Soul work and talk wholly in terms of Mind. One all Soul insists that Mind forget its reason and its logic and deal wholly in belief and faith. But a man is not only Mind, nor is he only Immortal Soul.

The ego is made up of both. When they become at war with each other we have either a religious fanatic or an atheist. Luckily for most of us, there is no conflict; we believe the things of the heart because of proofs the mind cannot understand, just as we know the demonstrable truths of science with expositions which mean nothing to a heart.

The esoteric meaning the Sublime Degree of Master Mason is not at all for the mind. To the mind it is not a proof of anything. But it truly is the Forty Seventh Problem of Euclid of the heart!

As that strange and wonderful mathematical wonder contains the germ of all scientific measurement, so does the symbolism of the Third Degree contain the germ of all doctrines of immortality, all beliefs in a hereafter, all heart certainty of a beneficent Creator Who has us in His Holy Keeping.

There have been those who, fearing that Freemasonry was about to set up a doctrine and a church to teach it, have frowned upon Freemasonry because of this symbolism. But note carefully, there is not in all the Master Mason Degree any suggestion of creed or dogma or even of a "Way to Heaven." The Mohammedan who believes that the way to Allah is to kill a Christian or two, will find no contradiction of his queer faith in the Master Masons degree. The Christian who sincerely believes that only by Baptism can he be "Saved" will find nothing in the Master Mason degree to hurt that faith. The Spiritualist who feels that unseen friends are waiting to receive him and carry him forward, can be a good Master Mason. The Third Degree teaches not how to win immortality, not how to get to heaven, not any particular way to worship the Great Architect; it teaches that immortality is; that God is; and leaves to others the fitting of those ineffable truths into what frames they please.

How could the degree be otherwise than sublime? It contains the greatest thought, the most intense hope, the most sincere prayer which all mankind possesses. From the dawn of humanity man has tried to see God. He has believed in God. He has struggled toward the light, often stumbling, often failing; but always stretching forth hands upward, winning his slow way to a little better spiritual comprehension of the Great Mystery.

The Sublime degree of Master Mason is at once a promise and a performance; an exposition and a demonstration; a doing and a believing of the loftiest aspirations in the heart of humanity. Of course it is sublime; and, equally of course, many who fail to see its inner meaning do not find it so. The beauty of the unseen sunset is there only for eyes which can see. The man who finds the degree otherwise than sublime must blame the man, not the degree. For it is not of the earth, earthy; there is in this ceremony and its simple but awful words, something as much beyond the minds of the generations of men who made it, as there is in its mystery. Something Beyond the comprehension of those who give it, and they, fortunate among men ... who receive it and take it to their hearts.

STB - August 1925