

The Level & Plumb

By Unknown

Like the Square and the Compasses, the Level and the Plumb are nearly always united in our Ritual. They really belong together, as much in moral teaching as in practical building. The one is used to lay horizontals, the other to try perpendiculars, and their use suggests their symbolism. By reason of their use, both are special working tools of the Fellowcraft, along with the Square; and they are also worn as jewels by two of the principal officers of the Lodge.

Among the Craft Masons of olden time the actual work of building was done by Fellowcrafts, using materials gathered and rough hewn by Apprentices, all working under the guidance of the Master. In our Symbolism, as the Apprentice is youth, so the Fellowcraft is manhood, the time when the actual work of life must be done on the Level, by the Plumb and Square. Next to the Square and Compasses, the Level and Plumb are among the noblest and simplest symbols of the Craft, and their meaning is so plain that it hardly needs to be pointed out. Yet they are so important, in use and meaning, that they might almost be numbered among the Lesser Lights of the Lodge.

The Level, so the newly made Mason is taught, is for the purpose of proving horizontals. An English writer finds a lesson in the structure of the Level, in the fact that its surface is level when the fluid is poised and at rest. From this use of the Level he bids us seek to attain a peaceful, balanced poise of mind, undisturbed by the passions which upset and sway us one way or the other. It is a council of perfection, he admits, but he insists that one of the best services of Masonry is to keep before us high ideals and, what is more, a constantly receding ideal, otherwise we should tire of it.

Of course, the great meaning of the Level is that it teaches equality, and that is a truth that needs to be carefully understood. There is no little confusion of mind about it. Our Declaration of American Independence tells us that all men are "created equal" but not many have tried to think out what the words really mean. With most of us it is a vague sentiment, a glittering generality born of the fact that all are made of the same dust, and sharers of the common human lot, moved by the same great faith and fears, hopes and loves – walking on the Level of Time until Death, by its grim democracy, erases all distinctions and reduces all to the same level. Anyone who faces the facts knows well enough that all men are not equal, either by nature or

by grace. Our humanity resembles the surface of the natural world in its hills and valleys. Men are very unequal in physical power, in mental abilities, in moral quality. No two men are equal; no two are alike. One man towers above his fellows, as a mountain above the hills. Some men can do what others can never do. Some have five talents, some two, and some but one. A genius can do with effortless ease what is futile for others to attempt, and a poet may be unequal to a hod-carrier in strength and sagacity. When there is inequality of gift it is idle to talk of equality of opportunity, no matter how fine the phrase may sound. It does not exist.

By no glib theory can humanity be reduced to a dead level.

The iron wrinkles of fact are stubborn realities. Manifestly it is better to have it so, because it would make a dull world if all men were equal in a literal sense. As it is, wherein one lacks another excels, and men are drawn together by the fact that they are unequal and unlike. The world has different tasks demanding different powers, brains to devise, seers to see, hands to execute, prophets to lead. We need poets to inspire, scientists to teach, pioneers to blaze the path to new lands. No doubt this was what Goethe meant when he said that it takes all men to make one man, and the work of each is the glory of all.

What, then, is the equality of which the Level is the Symbol? Clearly it is not identity, or even similarity of gift and endowment. No, it is something better; it is the equal right of each man to the full use and development of such power as he has, whatever it may be, unhindered by injustice or oppression. as our Declaration of Independence puts it, every man has an equal and inalienable right to "Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness," with due regard for the rights of others in the same quest. Or, as a famous slogan summed it up; "Equal Rights for all; Special Privileges to None!" That is to say, before the law every man has an equal right to equal justice, as before God, in whose presence all men are one in their littleness, each receives equally and impartially the blessing of the Eternal Love, even as the sun shines and the rain falls on all with equal benediction.

Albert Pike, and with him many others, have gone so far as to say that Masonry was the first apostle of equality in the true sense. One thing we do know; Freemasonry presided over the birth of our Republic, and by the skill of its leaders wrote its basic truth, of which the Level is the symbol, into organic law of this land, the War for Independence, and the fight for Constitutional Liberty, might have had another issue but for the fact that our leaders were held together by a mystic tie of obligation, vowed to the services of the rights of man. Even Thomas Paine, who was not a Mason, wrote an essay in honor of an order which stood for Government without tyranny and religion without superstition – two principles which belong together, like the Level and the Plumb. Thus, by all that is sacred both in our Country and our Craft, we are pledged to guard, defend and practice the truth taught by the Level.

But it is in the free and friendly air of a Lodge of Masons, about an Altar of Obligation and Prayer, that the principle of equality finds its most perfect and beautiful expression. There, upon

the Level, the Symbol of Equality, rich and poor, high and low, prince and plain citizen – men of diverse creeds, parties, interests, and occupations – meet in mutual respect and real regard, forgetting all differences of rank and station, and united for the highest good of all. "We Meet Upon the Level and Part Upon the Square;" titles, ranks, riches, do not pass the Inner Guard; and the humblest Brother is held in sacred regard, equally with the Brother who has attained the highest round of the wheel of fortune.

Every man in the Lodge is equally concerned in the building of the Temple, and each has his work to do. Because the task demands different gifts and powers, all are equally necessary to the work, the architect who draws the plans, the Apprentice who carries stones or shapes them with chisel and gavel; the Fellowcraft who polishes and deposits them in the wall, and the officers who marshal the workman, guide their labor, and pay their wages. Every one is equal to every other so long as he does good work, true work, square work. None but is necessary to the erection of the edifice; none but receives the honor of the Craft; and all together know the joy of seeing the Temple slowly rising in the midst of their labors. Thus Masonry lifts men to a high level, making each a fellow-worker in a great enterprise, and if it is the best brotherhood it is because it is a brotherhood of the best.

The Plumb is a symbol so simple that it needs no exposition. As the Level teaches unity in diversity and equality in difference, so the Plumb is a symbol of rectitude of conduct, integrity of life, and that uprightness of moral character which makes a good and just man. In the art of building accuracy is integrity, and if a wall be not exactly perpendicular, as tested by the Plumb-Line, it is weak and may fall, or else endanger the strength and stability of the whole. Just so, though we meet upon a Level, we must each build an upright character by the test of the Plumb, or we weaken the Fraternity we seek to serve and imperil its strength and standing in the community.

As a workman dare not deviate by the breadth of a hair to the right or to the left if his wall is to be strong and his arch stable, so Masons must walk erect and live upright lives. What is meant by an upright life each of us knows, but it has never been better described than in the 15th Psalm, which may be called the religion of a gentleman and the design upon the Trestleboard of every Mason:

"Lord, who shall abide in Thy Tabernacle? Who shall dwell in Thy Holy Hill? He that walketh uprightly, and worketh righteousness and speaketh the truth in his heart. He that backbiteth not with his tongue, nor doeth evil to his neighbor, nor taketh up a reproach against his neighbor. In whose eyes a vile person is condemned; but he honoreth them that fear the Lord. He that sweareth to his own hurt, and changeth not. He that putteth not out his money to usury, nor taketh reward against the innocent. He that doeth these things shall never be moved."

What is true of a man is equally true of a nation. The strength of a nation is its integrity, and no nation is stronger than the moral quality of the men who are its citizens. Always it comes back

at last to the individual, who is a living stone in the wall of society and the State, making it strong or weak. By every act of injustice, by every lack of integrity, we weaken society and imperil the security and sanctity of the common life. By every noble act we make all sacred things more sacred and secure for ourselves and for those who come after us. The Prophet Amos has a thrilling passage in which he lets us see how God tested the people which were of old, by the Plumb-Line; and by the same test we are tried:

Thus He Showed me; and, behold, the Lord stood upon a wall made by a Plumb-Line, with a Plumb-Line in His Hand. And the Lord said unto me; 'Amos, what seeth thou?' And I said, 'A Plumb-Line.' Then said the Lord, 'Behold, I will set a Plumb-Line in the midst of my people Israel: I will not again pass them by any more.'

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