

The Winding Stairs

Unknown

“And they went up the winding stairs into the middle chamber.” (I Kings 6:8)

Freemasonry’s Middle Chamber is wholly symbolic. Solomon the Wise would not have permitted any practice so uneconomic as sending multiplied thousands of workmen up a flight of stairs to a small Middle Chamber, to receive corn, wine and oil which had to be brought up in advance, only to be carried down in small lots by each workman as he received his wages.

There actually was a winding stair in Solomon’s Temple, but of the three, five and seven steps the scriptures are silent. Only in this country have the Winding Stairs but fifteen steps. In older days the stairs had but five, sometimes seven steps. Preston had thirty-six steps in his Winding Stairs; in series of one, three, five, seven, nine and eleven. The English system later eliminated the number eleven from Preston’s thirty-six, making but twenty-five in all.

The Stairs as a whole are a representation of life; not the physical life of eating, drinking, sleeping and working, but the mental and spiritual life, of both the lodge and the world without; of learning, studying, enlarging mental horizons and increasing the spiritual outlook.

The first three steps represent the three principal officers of a lodge, and – though not stated in the ritual – must always refer to Deity, of which “three,” the triangle, is the most ancient symbol.

They assure the Fellowcraft just starting his ascent that he does not climb alone. The Worshipful Master, Senior and Junior Wardens are themselves symbolic of the lodge, and thus (as a lodge is a symbol of the world) of the Masonic World – the Fraternity. The Fellowcraft is surrounded by the Craft. The brethren are present to help him climb. In his search for truth, in quest of his wages in the Middle Chamber, the Fellowcraft receives the support and assistance of all in the Mystic Circle; surely an impressive symbol.

Five is peculiarly the number of the Fellowcraft’s degree; it represents the central of the three groups which form the stairs; it refers to the five orders of architecture; five are required to hold a Fellowcraft’s lodge; there are five human senses; geometry is the fifth science, and so on. In the first degree the Blazing Star is Five Pointed and in the Sublime Degree are the Five Points of Fellowship.

In the Winding Stairs the number five represents the five orders of architecture. Here the neophyte is taught of architecture as a science; its beginnings are laid before him; he is shown how the Greeks commenced and Romans added to the kinds of architecture; he learns of the “beautiful, perfect and complete whole” which is a well-designed, well-constructed building.

Temples are built stone by stone, a little at a time. Each stone must be hewn from the solid rock of the quarry. Then it must be laid out and chipped with the gavel until it becomes a Perfect Ashlar. Finally it must be set in place with the tempered mortar which will bind. But before any stone may be placed, a plan must come into existence; the architect must play his part.

So must the Fellowcraft, studying the orders of architecture by which he will erect his spiritual Temple, design his structure before he commences to build.

There are “five” orders of architecture; not one. There are many plans on which a man may build his life, not one only. Freemasonry does not attempt to distinguish as between Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian as to beauty or desirability. She does suggest that the Tuscan, plainer than the Doric, and the Composite, more ornamental though not more beautiful than the Corinthian, are less revered than the ancient and original orders. Freemasonry makes no attempt to influence the Fellowcraft as to which order of life building he shall choose. He may elect the physical, the mental, the spiritual. Or he may choose the sacrificial – “plainer than Doric,” or the ornamental life, which is “not more beautiful than the Corinthian.” Freemasonry is concerned less with what order of spiritual architecture a Fellowcraft chooses by which to build, than that he does choose one; that he build not aimlessly.

Architecture is the most expressive of all the arts. Painting and sculpture, noble though they are, lack the utility of architecture, and strive to interpret nature rather than to originate. Architecture is not hampered by the necessity of reproducing something already in existence. It may raise its spires untrammelled by any natural model; it may fling its arches gloriously across a nave and a transept with no similitude in nature to hamper by suggestion. The architect may – if his genius be great enough – tell in his structure truths which may not be put into words, inspire by glories not sung in the divinest harmonies.

So may the builder of his own House Not Made With Hands, if he chooses aright his plan of life and hews to the line of his plan. So, indeed, have done all those great men who have led the world; the Prophets of old, Pythagoras, Confucius, Buddha, Shakespeare, Milton, Goethe, Washington, Lincoln –.

If the Fellowcraft, climbing his three, five and seven steps to the Middle Chamber of unknown proportions, containing an unknown Wage, is overweighed with the emphasis put upon the spiritual side of life, he may here be comforted.

Freemasonry is not an ascetic organization. It recognizes that the physical is as much a part of normal life as the mental and spiritual upon which so much emphasis is put.

The Fellowcraft's degree is a glorification of education, the gaining of knowledge, the study of the Seven Liberal Arts and Sciences and all that they connote. Therefore it is wholly logical that the degree should make special references to the five means by which man has acquired all his knowledge; aye, by which he will ever acquire any knowledge.

Take away his five senses and a man is no more a man; perhaps his mind is no more a mind. With no contact whatever with the material world he can learn nothing of it. As man reaches up through the material to the spiritual, he can learn nothing of the ethical side of life without a means of contact with the physical.

If there are limits beyond which human investigations and explorations into the unknown may not go, it is because of the limitations of the five senses. Not even the extension of those senses by the marvelously sensitive instruments of science may overcome, in the last analysis, the limits of the five senses.

Except for one factor! Brute beasts hear, see, feel, smell and taste, as we do. But they garner no facts of science, win no truths. formulate no laws of nature through these senses. More than the five senses are necessary to perceive the relation between thing and thing, and life and life. That factor is the perception, the mind, the soul or spirit, if you will, which differentiates man from all other living beings.

The Fellowcraft's five steps glorify the five senses of human nature because Freemasonry is a well-rounded scheme of living which recognizes the physical as well as the mental life of men, and knows that only through the physical do we perceive the spiritual. It is in this sense, not as a simple lesson in physiology, that we are to receive the teachings of the five steps by which we rise above the ground floor of the Temple to that last flight of seven steps which are typical of knowledge.

Most potent of numbers in the ancient religions, the number seven has deep significance. The Pythagoreans called it the perfect number because it is made up of three and four, the two perfect figures, triangle and square. It was the virgin number because it cannot by multiplication produce any numbers within ten, as can two and two, two and three, two and four, or three and three. Nor can it be produced by the multiplication of any whole number.

Our ancient ancestors knew seven planets. seven Pleiades, seven Hyades, seven lights burned before the Altar of Mithras, the Goths had seven Deities; Sun, Moon, Tuisco, Woden, Thor, Friga and Seatur or Saturn, from which we derive the names of the seven days of our week. In the Gothic mysteries the candidate met with seven obstructions; the ancient Jews swore by seven, because seven witnesses were used to confirm, and seven sacrifices offered to attest truth. The Sabbath is the seventh day; Noah had seven day's notice of the flood; God created the heaven and earth in six days and rested on the seventh day; the walls of Jericho were encompassed seven times by seven priests bearing seven rams' horns; the Temple was seven

years in building, the seven branched candlestick burned in the Tabernacle and so on through a thousand references.

It is only necessary to refer to the seven required to open an Entered Apprentice lodge, the seven original officers of a lodge (some now have nine or ten, or even more) and the seven steps which complete the Winding Stairs to show that seven is an important number in the Fraternity.

The seventeenth century conception of a liberal education was compromised in the study of Grammar, Rhetoric and Logic; called the “trivium.” and Arithmetic, Geometry, Music and Astronomy, called the “quadrivium. William Preston endeavored to compress into his Middle Chamber Lecture enough of these to make at least an outline available to men who might otherwise know nothing of them.

In our day and times grammar and rhetoric are considered of importance, but in a secondary way; logic is more or less swallowed up as study in the reasoning appropriate to any particular subject; arithmetic, of course, continues its primary importance, but from the standpoint of science, geometry and its off-shoots are still the vital sciences of measurement. Music is no longer a necessary part of a liberal education; it is now one of the arts, not the sciences, and astronomy is so interrelated with physics that it is hard to say where one leaves off and the other begins. As for electricity, chemistry, biology, civics, government and the various physical sciences, they were barely dreamed of in Preston’s day.

So it is not actually but symbolically that we are to climb the seven steps. As a Masonic author put it:

“William Preston, who put so practical an interpretation upon these steps, lived in an age when these did, indeed, represent all 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 a method of reasoning which logicians have accomplished. When we ascend by Arithmetic and Geometry we must visualize all science; since science is but 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 and loveliness of whatever kind. Not to be familiar 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 a study of the solar system and the stars as it did in William Preston’s day, but also a 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 riches only can the truest brotherhood be practiced.”

Finally, consider the implication of the “winding” stairs as opposed to those which are straight. The one virtue which most distinguishes man is courage. It requires more courage to face the unknown than the known. A straight stair, a ladder, hides neither secret nor mystery at its top. But the stairs which wind hide each step from the climber; what is just around the corner is unknown. The Winding Stairs of life lead us to we know not what; for some of us, a Middle Chamber of fame and fortune, for others, of pain and frustration. The Angle of Death may stand with drawn sword on the very next step for any of us. Yet, man climbs!

Man has always climbed; he climbed from a cave man savagery to the dawn of civilization; Lowell's:

– brute despair of trampled centuries
Leapt up with one hoarse yell and snapped its hands,
Groped for its right with horny, callous hands,
And stared around for God with bloodshot eyes.

He was a climbing from slavery to independence, from the brute to the spiritual. Through ignorance, darkness, misery, cruelty, wrong, oppression, danger and despair; man has climbed his own Winding Stairs through much the same experience as that of the race.

Aye, man climbs because he has courage; because he has faith, because he is a man. So must the Freemason climb. The Winding Stairs do lead somewhere. There is a Middle Chamber. There are wages of the Fellowcraft to be earned.

So believing, so unafraid, climbing, the Fellowcraft may hope at the top of his Winding Stairs to reach a Middle Chamber, and see a new sign in the East –

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