

LECTURE ON THE TRACING BOARD IN THE MARK DEGREE



??? RETHREN, - The history and the ceremonial of the Mark Degree have reference more than other branches of the Royal Art, to the actual operations of those of our ancient brethren who were employed in building the Temple of King Solomon; the pictorial representation on the board in front of you is an attempt to set forth, in a graphic form, such of the operations, and the implements and tools used, as we depend upon to illustrate the valuable lessons afforded in this degree. As throughout all Freemasonry, in the Mark Degree we hold the Volume of the Sacred Law in the highest possible estimation, containing as it does the revealed will of the Almighty. In the foreground of the illustration therefore will be found, not the bound volume such as we are at the present time accustomed to use, but the roll of parchment upon which the Pentateuch and certain of the historical books were written in the days of King Solomon. It was not until the time of Esdras, forty years after the building of the second temple, that the various inspired writings were brought together by that pious scribe and collated into one volume.

Making the Volume of the Sacred Law, as it were, the threshold of your life, "a lamp unto thy feet," your attention is next directed to the emblems of reward and punishment as symbolised by the wicket of the Senior Warden and the figure of the Junior Warden ready to inflict God's judgments upon the evildoer, while in the distance the Heavenly Jerusalem, the city made without hands, in which the righteous dwell for evermore, is typified by the earthly temple which we strive to keep for His honour and glory. Illumined as it is by the first beams of the rising sun, we are taught to think of the Sun of Righteousness, arising with healing in His wings. Looking down upon, and embracing everything in its glance, is the All-seeing Eye, typical of the Grand Overseer of the Universe.

As an Entered Apprentice you were taught to regard the Almighty God of Heaven and Earth as your Creator, as a Fellow Craft, you looked up to Him as your Preserver and Guide through life, and as a Master Mason it is the eternal principle implanted in you by Him that alone inspires you with the hope of a joyful resurrection to eternal life. But in the degree to which you have just been advanced, you are taught that the Almighty will be the awful Judge in that day when the secrets of all hearts are revealed, and therefore the Mark Degree teaches us, in the very forefront of its precepts, to form our thoughts, words, and actions upon the eternal principles laid down for our guidance in the Volume of the Sacred Law, so that when tried by the square of the Grand Overseer of the Universe they may be counted unto us for righteousness.

In the illustration before you, you will observe that entrance to the Holy City is gained by passing over the checkered floor and ascending the nine steps, which are again referred to in the representation of Jacob's ladder above. In Freemasonry the number nine, 3x3, is held sacred, as enumerating the principal virtues, of which the chief are Faith, Hope, and Charity, which are described by the three Hebrew words.

It may be interesting in this connection to note that in olden time all public edifices, and especially those of sacred character, were approached by an odd number of steps, it being considered to be a good omen that the foot which first pressed the step should be the first to enter the building.

The checkered floor is held, as in Craft Masonry to represent the diversities of life, which is made up of joy and sorrow, lights and shadows, a due proportion of both of which make up the total of our earthly pilgrimage. Surrounding the illustration is what some call the tessellated border. What has been said of the checkered pavement may also be said of the border, but a further explanation is that whilst the Temple was in course of completion, and various sections of the sacred pavement were finished, the space around each section was fenced off with ropes, to keep away the feet of the profane, and these ropes were knotted at the four corners with tassels, represented, as you will have seen in a Craft Lodge, by four tassels pendant from the four corners of the Lodge, and these, you were taught, reminded you of the cardinal virtues of Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, and Temperance, which should ever bound our lives and actions.

In the centre of the illustration we see the several stages of the building of King Solomon's Temple. In the foreground are the forests of Lebanon with their magnificent cedars, and the fir trees of Tyre which furnish the timber. Here are also the plains of Zeredatha made of a peculiar clay, very suitable for its cohesive and plastic quality for the purposes of the moulder in metals. Hence all the brass work of the Temple was cast in this place.

The Hebrew letters to which I now direct your attention may be thus translated: Lapis reprobatus est ab aedificatoribus, caput anguli fit, or "The stone which the builders rejected is become the head of the corner." The curious symbols adjacent refer to the methods of communication at one time adopted by our predecessors; they are in reality a cipher, which any expert brother will be glad to explain to you at further leisure, and at greater length than is now possible.

In ancient times it was sometimes necessary for the craftsmen to travel great distances in search of work. They procured therefore from their homes, or their mother lodges, recommendations or testimonials which would entitle them to admission to other lodges, and further, would serve as suitable means of identification on returning home, it might be after a lapse of many years. Inasmuch as the character of a mason, then as now, carried with it many and important privileges, it was necessary for their safeguarding, that secret means of communication should be adopted. These consisted of our secret grip, password and signs; of the cryptic mode of writing alluded to, and the "tessera." A tessera was a white stone, which was broken in half, the

one half being retained by the Lodge, the other half by the craftsman. The stone was divided by fracture that there might be no doubt as to the identity of the respective halves when brought together again. This custom explains the allusion to a white stone in the scripture you have heard read.

Around the board are depicted various emblems, the use and meaning of many of which are quite familiar to you as a Master Mason. The working tools of a Mark Master Mason are the mallet and the chisel. As an Entered Apprentice you are familiar with the gavel and the chisel, and therefore you are taught in Mark Masonry as in Craft that a good education is one of the best instruments of success in life. The mallet differs from the gavel, in that the latter was used at the quarries, the former at the actual building, at which you have heard there was no metal or tool of any sort used, all material being exactly prepared at a distance, so as to be put exactly in place. The mallet was a wooden implement designed to be used in fixing each stone in its proper place with reference to its neighbours, and therefore as Mark Masons we are given to understand by the association of mallet and chisel that the chief benefit of education is to teach us to know our proper place in the world, having respect to the right and privileges of our fellows.

With reference to the white stone already alluded to, I may tell you that there is a legend that out of a very precious white stone our Grand Master fashioned the keystone for the main Arch of Solomon's Temple. It was a work of singular form and beauty which aroused the admiration of the practical overseers, who, while not knowing either the marks it bore or the place for it in the noble structure on the crown of Mount Moriah, still refused to reject it, until at a loss for its final disposal when, like much of what is pure, good and beautiful in this world, the stone was set aside by the master builders. (1) The scriptural quotation which accompanies its presentation to the candidate is one of the grandest in the long list of Divine promises, as the reward for work, good, true and square. It is to be given to a certain class that in life have fought a good fight and become victors in the contest.

“ To him that overcometh.”

The lesson of the Mark Master's degree is, that fraud or hypocrisy can never succeed. Reward is only to those who overcome. The fellow-crafts who through the week wrought in the quarries of Zeredatha, brought up their work on Friday afternoon to Jerusalem and received their wages of corn, wine and oil. Probably they spent the Sabbath in the Holy City, and long before cock-crow on the first day of the week they started back along the Jordan to resume the mallet and chisel as the working tools of their profession.

The journey to and from Jerusalem was long and tedious one. With the lighter stones they had fashioned during the week resting on their shoulders, they travelled along over dangers and difficulties, overcoming, until the tapering spires and glittering domes of the beloved city burst upon their vision. Rejoicing over the task performed and the journey completed, they presented their work and received their pay. With renewed energy they resumed their task from day to day, from week to week, and month to month, until at last the thing of grandeur on Moriah's top had assumed its final form of grace and beauty, and the last “ sixth hour “ had come.

And when that hour comes, brethren, to ourselves, when work is over, and the working tools and garments of labour laid aside, then the “ living stones,” all in proper form and place, will there be seen forming the temple of the triune God, each stone being the work and bearing the mark of him that overcometh.

(1) It is much to be regretted that the moral lesson drawn from the “White Stone” in this beautiful degree is permitted to receive but a passing allusion.

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