

Behind The Symbol

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Archaeologists have discovered many old cities, built on the ruins of still older cities, which in turn were erected upon the remains of cities still older. These several cities were built, existed for a time, were destroyed and forgotten and new cities built above. The artifacts found at the top are totally different from those found at the bottom of the complete excavations, as in nature, since the several cities may have been thousands of years in building, life, destruction and rebuilding.

Many common words in English must be read in context if they are to be understood, which is one of the reasons those who speak other languages from birth find English so difficult. The "good" man may be either the moral man or the physically strong man. The "good" earth is that which grows crops well, while "good" credit is trustworthiness of him who possesses it; a "good" game may be either one which men like to play, or so well played that men like to watch it.

Masonic symbols are like the many buried cities of Ur of the Chaldees; similar to the many words which mean different things at different times to different people when used in different ways. It may be too much to say that all Masonic symbols have more than one meaning, but it is certainly true that most of those objects or ideas or practices which we call symbols have at least two and most of them many meanings.

As a rule only one - and that the simplest-- is described in the ritual. The rest, the individual brother is supposed to hunt out for himself.

A large book would be required to list all Masonic symbols and even suggest the several meanings of each. All that may be attempted here is a suggestion of the "symbol behind the symbol" in a few of Masonry's pictures. The word "pictures" here refers to the oft quoted definition of Masonry. "A beautiful system of morality veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols".

The symbol, then, is a picture. But it is not a mirror, which shows only what stands before it. It is an illustration which has more than one meaning.

The first, and among the most impressive symbols of Masonry to confront the candidate, to most initiates, is the apron. The candidate is told that it is "an emblem of innocence and the badge of a Mason".

What is "innocence", as the word here is used? Surely not ignorance! The lamb, the baby, the lily are "innocent", in the sense that they know nothing, especially nothing of evil. But a man grown - and no male less than a man grown may be a Mason - must know evil to distinguish the good.\

Therefore, "innocence", as taught by the apron must be other than ignorance.

Originally, the Masonic apron was a skin, worn to protect both the clothing of the workman and the body beneath the clothing from injury, and perhaps to provide a pocket in which to carry tools.

The operative apron was not necessarily white. When it gave way to the smaller and "token" apron of lambskin (because that is a soft and pliable material), white, the color of "innocence", became associated with the apron., It is still associated, but the innocence is that of intent not to do evil, not of knowledge of evil. The Mason is "innocent" when his heart is gently towards weakness, chivalrous towards those dependent upon him, tolerate of his fellows' weaknesses, forgiving of his brethren's mistakes.

Beneath this is the really great meaning of the apron; that of the dignity and worth of labor, the honor of being a workman, the glory of being a contributor to life and living. Perhaps this attitude toward labor and the laborer which in the early Middle Ages were considered mean and of no account, is Masonry's greatest contribution to a modern philosophy of life. That Mason who reads into his newly acquired lambskin the thought that it is a badge signifying that it is an honor to do constructive work, has hold of the symbol behind the symbol" of innocence and the real value of that which is "more ancient than the Golden Fleece".

In the Entered Apprentice Degree, an initiate learns the importance of the cornerstone, but so little stress is laid upon it ritualistically that many remain in ignorance of its principal significance - the "symbol behind the symbol" which is the necessity of sacrifice in any well ordered life.

The whole subject of cornerstones, cornerstone laying, cornerstone ceremonies, is bound up in the dreadful "foundation sacrifice" rites of the dark Ages when superstition ran rife and it was believed that buildings would fall if not protected by "good spirits" in the Other World. To provide these "good spirits", human beings were buried alive in hollow cornerstones, there to die a hideous death by suffocation, that their released spirits might guard the building to be erected upon the stone, against the evil work of the powers of darkness.

The rite survives only in the beautiful modern Masonic ceremony of laying the cornerstones of buildings. We are no longer superstitious about it, but we still hollow out the cornerstone and place therein small objects for posterity to see; the list of those who erected the building, coins of the day, a book, a photograph, a daily newspaper - whatever the imagination of the committee in charge may suggest.

We have the ceremony; we forget, most of us, its origin, but in freemasonry he who hunts for the symbol behind the symbol will find in the emphasis upon the cornerstone the need of sacrifice; the sacrifice of time, of effort, of thought which all good men in general and all good Masons in particular must make if they are to play other than a selfish part in the lives of their communities.

Few Masonic symbols are less understood - and the fault is that of the ritual and not the philosophy which is Masonry - than the "certain point within a circle".

Both its derivation and its real meaning have become obscured with the passage of years and with, alas, good will but poor execution of the ritual tinkers - those good men and true who have altered ritual to "make it nearer to the heart with the best of intentions but without much knowledge of what they did.

Moronically, the point within the circle was the beginning of the process in which the King's Master Mason, overseeing and managing the building of a great Cathedral, tried the squares of the workmen that they might be true ninety degree angles.

Every school boy knows the simple geometrical demonstration, but in days when only the few could read and write, this was the great secret - the "secret of the square."

Draw a circle. Put a dot upon it, anywhere. Draw a line through the center of the circle so it crosses the circle on both sides. Connect the dot with the points where the straight line crosses the circle. The result is a right angle.

It was thus that the King's Master Mason tested the wooden squares of his stone Masons. Originally, "While a Mason kept his tools circumscribed by the point and circle, they could not materially err". Today the line across has become two; we have added the Holy Sts. John and the Holy Scriptures and we now circumscribe our passions and not our tools, thus losing the old significance of the symbol. But the meaning is still there; the symbol behind the symbol is the need of true tools for our work, whether the tools are of wood and metal for labor upon material, of science and wit for work upon the affairs of life.

In other words, the symbol behind the symbol is the need for standards known to be correct to which to hew, and a right pattern to follow during all of Masonic life.

"....and they went up the winding stairs into the middle chamber." (I Kings VI-8)

The Winding Stairs is one of the great symbols of the Fellowcraft Degree. It has a hidden, a covered, a buried meaning not easily to be seen without some intensive looking and not even hinted in the ritual. William Preston, who was more "father of the ritual" of the Fellowcraft Degree than any other, hoped to make this ceremony in Freemasonry a vehicle which would create a desire for a liberal education in those who received it; hence the emphasis upon the liberal arts and sciences, the orders of architecture, etc.

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But philosophers of Masonry have seen a deeper meaning in the stairs. as the Fellowcraft Degree as a whole is one of manhood-- as opposed to youth in the Entered Apprentice Degree, and old age in the Master Mason Degree - they find in the winding stairs that incentive to courage without which no man successfully combats the evils, dangers and misfortunes of life.

The point is that the stairs wind.

It does not take courage to climb a straight stair, on which every step can be seen from the one before and the top is in view from the beginning. If there are perils on the way on a straight stair, they can be noted and preparations made.\

But on winding stair, but one or two steps ahead are visible. What is around the corner? To what difficulties or dangers does progress on an unseen stairway lead?

It takes courage to ascent. The Angel of Death may stand with sword drawn around the next bend. There may be lions in the path, difficulties to surmount, dangers to overcome.

Yet man climbs - aye, he climbs because he is a man, a man grown, a man self-sufficient, and willing, and able to face what life brings. The Fellowcraft Degree as a whole is a preparation for successful manhood; nothing within it has a greater incentive for him who can see with mental eyes the symbol behind the symbol of the winding stairs, than this thought of the courage a real and whole man must have if he is to reach the Middle Chamber...

The second great symbol of the fellowcraft Degree is the letter G. Of its obvious meanings the degree is sufficiently explanatory. But why the emphasis upon geometry?

"Prove all things - hold fast to that which is good (I Thessalonians V: 21).

There is no such thing as a proof of a belief which has no evidence; man cannot "prove God" in the same way in which he can "prove" an algebraic equation. Faith is a matter of the heart; geometry is a matter of the mind. But there is a meeting point where mind and heart touch. And there is a meeting point where faith and science touch.

The "question of the watch" has confounded many who have refused to believe in a Creator. It is possible for the human mind to believe that a watch can make itself, wind itself. It must be the work of a man. Inasmuch as it can predict, it must work in accord with natural laws.

No one who found a watch, going, could be convinced that it had not been would within thirty-six hours, and had not been put where it was found by a human agency.

Geometry proves the visible universe to be a great watch. Geometry can predict the future, just as a watch can predict the interval of elapsed time before a certain hour. As, obviously, man did not create the solar system, or the laws by which geometry can predict the eclipses, the sunrise and sunset, the phases of the moon, the tides, they must have had another, not a human creator.

Geometry proves that the universe runs according to law.

Masons name the creator Great Architect of the Universe. Other men have a thousand different names for Him.

But it is Geometry which produces the nearest possible "proof" of His existence. Hence the symbol behind the symbol of the letter G is the scientific demonstration not only that "order is heaven's first law" but that there is a Creator, name Him as you will.

One of the many mysteries which Freemasonry presents to those who love and follow her in the absence of comprehension, on the part of the many, of the real content of the Master Mason Degree. It is, apparently, being unable to see the forest because there are so many trees; an inability to see the ocean because there are so many waves and so much foam!

No greater ceremony to express man's longing for and belief in immortality has yet been conceived; no more beautiful mental rainbow has ever arched through the skies of the mind than "The Search for That Which Was Lost". Yet too many see only the literal story of the tragedy of Hiram and thus fail to see as their personal own a vista which has for a far horizon the realization of the dearest hope of all mankind.

The histories of all peoples reflect a belief in an ancient and lost Golden Age; an Arcady; a Fairyland; a Lost continent in which all men were happy and all joys were constant; a place and time of contentment before evil came to the world.

It is the basis for all the "searches"-- for the hope of the recovery of the Holy Grail; the wish for a faith which cannot be undermined; the longing for a certainty about life here and hereafter.

Had we lost merely a word - one or more syllables - how easy to invent another. But the "word which was lost" is the memory in man's consciousness that there is a Something Beyond his senses, the knowledge they bring him, his understanding of the life he lives. It is his longing to possess this again - as racial memories demonstrate that he once possessed it - which is masonically expressed in The Search.

This is the symbol behind the symbol of the Master Mason Degree.