

FROM LEFT TO RIGHT

For some of us nothing in Masonry is more impressive than its very first rite, after an initiate has told "In Whom Do You Put Your Trust." It may be easily overlooked, but not to see it is to miss a part of that beauty we were sent to seek.

Surely he is a strange man who can witness it without deep feeling. The initiate is told that he can neither foresee nor prevent danger, but that he is in the hands of a true and trusty friend in whose fidelity he can, with safety, confide. It is literally true of the candidate, as it is of all of us.

As a ceremony it may mean nothing, as a symbol it means everything, if we regard initiation as we should, as a picture of a man pursuing the journey of life, groping his dim and devious way out of the unreal into the real, out of darkness into light, out of the shadows into the way of life everlasting.

So groping, yet gently guided and guarded, man sets out on a mystic journey on an unseen road, traveling from the West to the East, and then from the East to the West by way of the South, seeking a city that hath foundations, where truth is known in fullness and life reveals both its meaning and its mystery. How profoundly true it is of the way we all must walk.

From the hour we are born till we are laid in our grave we grope our way in the dark, and none could find or keep the path without a guide. From how many ills, how many perils, how many pitfalls we are guarded in the midst of the years! With all our boasted wisdom and foresight, even when we fancy we are secure we may be in the presence of dire danger, if not death itself.

Truly it does not lie within a man to direct his path, and without a true and trusted Friend in whom he can confide, not one of us would find his way home. So Masonry teaches us, simply but unmistakably, at the first step as at the last, that we live and walk by Faith, not by sight; and to know that fact is the beginning of wisdom. Since this is so, since no man can find his way alone, in life as in the lodge we must with humility trust our Guide, learn His ways, follow Him and fear no danger. Happy is the man who has learned that secret.

No wonder this simple rite is one of the oldest and most universal known among men. In all lands, in all ages, as far back as we have record, one may trace it, going back to the days when man thought the sun was God, or at least His visible outshining, whose daily journey through the sky, from East to the West by way of the South, he followed in his faith and worship, seeking to win the favor of the Eternal by imitating his actions and reproducing His ways upon earth. In Egypt, in India, in Greece, it was so. In the East, among the Magi, the priest walked three times around the Altar, keeping it to his right, chanting hymns, as in the Lodge we recite words from the Book of Holy Law. Some think the Druids had the same rite, which is why the stones at Stonehenge are arranged in circular form about a huge altar; and no doubt it is true.

What did man mean by the old and eloquent rite? All the early thought of man was mixed up with magic, and he is not yet free from it. One finds traces of it even in our own day. By magic is meant the idea that by imitating the ways of God we can actually control Him and make Him do what we want done. It is a false idea, but it still clings to much of our religion, as when men imagine that by saying so many prayers that they have gained so much merit.

Masonry is not magic; it is moral science. In the Lodge we are taught that we must learn the way and will of God, not in order to use Him for our ends, but the better to be used by Him for His ends. The difference may seem slight at first, but it is really the difference between a true and a false faith - between religion and superstition. Much of the religion of today is sheer superstition, in which magic takes the place of morals. In Masonry morality has first place, and no religion is valid without it.

As might be expected, a rite so old, so universal, so profoundly simple, has had many meanings read into it.. The more the better; as a great teacher said of the Bible, the more meanings we find in it the richer we are. Some find in this old and simple rite a parable of the history of Masonry itself, which had its origin in the East and journeyed to the West, bringing the oldest wisdom of the world to bless and guide the newest lands.

Others see in it a symbol of the story of humanity, in its slow, fumbling march up out of savagery into the light of civilization; and it does lend itself to such a meaning. Often the race has seemed to be marching round and round, moving but making no progress; but that is only seeming. It does advance, in spite of the difficulties and obstructions in its path.

Still other think that it is a parable of the life of each individual, showing our advance from youth with its rising sun in the East, which reaches its zenith in the meridian splendor of the South, and declines with the falling daylight to old age in the West. It is thus an allegory of the life of man upon the earth, its progress and its pathos, and it is true to fact.

All of these meanings are true and beautiful; but there is another and deeper meaning taught us more clearly in the old English Rituals than in our own. It offers us an answer to the persistent questions: What am I? Whence Came I? Whither Go I? It tells us that the west is the symbol of this world; the East of the world above and beyond. Hence the colloquy in the first degree:

"As a Mason, whence do you come?" "From the West." "Whither do you journey?" "To the East."
"What is your inducement?" "In quest of light."

That is, man supposes that his life originated in this world, and he answers accordingly. But that is because he is not properly instructed; he has not yet learned the great secret that the soul, our life-star, had elsewhere its setting and comes from beyond this world of sense and time. It is only sent into this dim world of sense and shadow for discipline and development - sent to find itself. So, in the Third degree, the answers are different, for by that time the initiate has been taught a higher truth:

"Whence do you come?" "From the East." "Whither are you wending?" "To the West." "What is your inducement?" "To find that which is lost." "Where do you hope to find it?" "In the center."

Ah, here is real insight and understanding, to know which is to have a key to much that we do and endure in our life on earth; much which otherwise remains a riddle. Our life here in time and flesh is a becoming, a chance to find ourselves. It is as Keats said, a vale of soul-making, and the hard things that hit and hurt us must be needed for our making, else they would not be.

Nor do we walk with aimless feet, journeying nowhere, as the smart philosophers of our day tell us. It is not a futile quest in which we are engaged. And Masonry assures us that we are both guided and guarded by the Friend who knows the way and may be trusted to the end. Its promise is that the veils will be removed from our eyes and the truth made known to us, when we are ready and worthy to receive it. But, not until then!

It is a goodly teaching, tried by long ages and found to be wise and true. Alas, it is easily lost sight of and forgotten, and we need to learn it again and again. Here too, Masonry is a wise teacher; it repeats, line upon line, precept upon precept. In every degree it shows us the march of the soul around the Altar, and then beyond it up the winding, spiral stair, and still beyond into the light and joy of the Eternal Life.

Save by the old Roman Road none attain the new. From the Ancient Hills alone we catch the view!