

HOUR GLASS AND SCYTHE

In nearly all Masonic rituals in the United States, these two emblems of the third degree are explained in practically the form given by Thomas Smith Webb:

“The Hour-Glass is an emblem of human life; behold! how swiftly the sands run, and how rapidly our lives are drawing to a close. We cannot, without astonishment, behold the little particles which are contained in this machine, how they pass away almost imperceptibly, and yet to our surprise, in the short space of an hour, they are all exhausted. Thus wastes man! today, he puts forth the tender leaves of hope; tomorrow, blossoms and bears his blushing honors which upon him; the next day comes a frost, which nips the shoot, and when he thinks his greatness is still aspiring, he falls, like autumn leaves, to enrich our mother earth.

“The Scythe is an emblem of time, which cuts the brittle thread of life and launches us into eternity. Behold, what havoc the scythe of time makes amongst the human race; if by chance we should escape the numerous evils incident to childhood and youth, and with that health and vigor arrive to the years of manhood, yet withall we must soon be cut down by the all-devouring scythe of time, and be gathered into the land where our fathers are gone before us.

Both these emblems seems to be inventions of the ingenious and resourceful American who left do tremendous an imprint upon our ceremonies. MacKensie, the English Masonic encyclopedist, says of the hour glass: “Used in the third degree by Webb - but not essential nor authorized in any way.

Of the scythe, he says: “Since the time of Webb, the scythe has been adopted in the American system of Freemasonry, as an emblem of the power of time in destroying the institutions of mankind. In England it is no regarded as of any typical meaning.”

Woodford, in Kenning’s Encyclopedia, says: “Hour Glass - Said by some to be a Masonic symbol, Oliver inter alios, as an emblem of human life; but in our opinion, not strictly speaking so. Woodford does not mention the scythe.

Mackey, (Clegg revised edition) credits the hour glass to Webb and states: “As a Masonic symbol it is of comparatively modern date.” The familiar illustrations of these emblems, shown on many if not most Lodge charts, and in that collection of monstrosities which commercial companies have sold to confiding Lodges on lantern slides to illustrate the lectures, are based on the Doolittle pictures in the “True Masonic Chart” of Jeremy Cross.

Here the scythe appears in the drawing of the marble monument, held under the arm of the very chubby Father Time, who is provided with a most substantial pair of wings. It also appears as a separate illustration for the “scythe of time.” In the same quaint work the hour glass is illustrated with a pair of open wings.

If young in Freemasonry, both scythe and hour glass are very old. Old Testament days knew the sickle; ancient Egypt had reaping knives. Just when the knife or sickle was curved into the familiar two-handed tool with the crooked handle is less important than that it was early associated with a symbolic meaning, as an instrument for the reaping of humanity, the cutting off of life. Revelation 14-14 to 20 inclusive, is illustrative:

“And I looked, and behold a white cloud, and upon the cloud one sat like unto the Son of man, having on his head a golden crown, and in his hand a sharp sickle. And another angel came out of the temple, crying with a loud voice to him that sat on the cloud, Thrust in thy sickle, and reap; for the time is come for thee to reap; for the harvest of the earth is ripe. And he that sat on the cloud thrust in his sickle on the earth; and the earth was reaped. And another angel came out of the temple which is in heaven, he also having a sharp sickle. And another angel came out from the altar, which had power over fire; and cried with a loud cry to him that had the sharp sickle, saying; Thrust thy sickle, and gather the clusters of the vine of the earth; for her grapes are fully ripe. And the angle thrust in his sickle into the earth, and gathered the vine of the earth, and cast it into the great winepress of the wrath of God. And the winepress was trodden without the city, and blood came out of the winepress, even unto the horse bridles, by the space of a thousand and six hundred furlongs.”

Ancient Greece and Rome knew three cruel fates; Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos. Clotho held the distaff from which the thread of life was spun by Lachesis, while Atropos wielded the shears and cut the thread when life was ended. They were deemed cruel because neither she who held the staff of life, she who spun the thread nor she who cut it, regarded the wishes of any man.

In the Sublime Degree Freemasons hear a beautiful prayer, taken almost wholly from the Book of Job (14, to 14 inclusive). Just why the fathers of the ritual thought they could improve upon Job, and left out here a verse, thee substituted a word, is a sealed mystery. The phrases of the King James version seem intimately connected with the ritual of our hour glass and scythe of time:

Man that is born of a woman is of a few days and full of trouble. He cometh forth like a flower, and is cut; he fleeth also as a shadow, and continueth not. And dost thou open thine eyes upon such a one, and bringest me unto judgment with thee? Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? not one. Seeing his days are determined, the number of his months are with thee, thou hast appointed his bounds that he cannot pass; turn from him, that he may rest, till he shall accomplish, as an hireling, his day. For there is hope of a tree, if it be cut down, that it will sprout again, and that the tender branch thereof will not cease. Though the root thereof wax old in the earth, and the stock thereof die in the ground; Yet through the scent of water it will bud, and bring boughs like a plant. But man dieth, and wasteth away; yea, man giveth up the ghost, and where is he? As the Waters fail from the sea, and the flood decayeth and drieth up; so man lieth down and riseth not; till the heavens be no more, they shall not awake, nor be raised out of their sleep. O that thou wouldest keep me secret, until thy wrath be past, that thou wouldest appoint me a set time and remember me! If a man die, shall he live again? All the days of my appointed time will I wait, till my change come.”

“If a man die, shall he live again?” Job’s cry of despair has rung down the centuries; it is one of Freemasonry’s glories that her answer is as ringing! Her tragedy ends in hope; her assurances of immortality are positive. Ritual of hour glass and scythe, if read alone, is gloomy and disheartening, but not as parts of a whole which end in a certainty of immortality.

Measurement of time has demanded the attention of learned men in all ages. Our modern clocks, watches and chronometers have a long and intricate history, and many ancestors quite unlike their descendants; among them the sun dial and hour glass. Just how old the instrument is which measures time by the slow dropping of liquid or running sand is not easily stated; ancient Egypt knew a water clock and Plato is said to have invented the “Clepsydra,” in water drips from container to container, marking the passing of hours. The substitution of sand for water must have occurred early, sand having the great advantage that it runs more slowly than water and does not evaporate in the process. The sealed semi-vacuum double bulbs of more modern days were then, of course, unknown.

Nor can the earliest symbolic relationship between the passage of hours and days and man’s life both here and hereafter be stated; the connection between time and life is so intimate that it is difficult to believe that ideas of duration as a factor of life, as well as a practical matter of eating, sleeping, etc., did not arise coincidentally.

Both old and New Testaments have this poetry; Isaiah 38-10:

“I said in the cutting off of my days, I shall go to the gates of the grave: I am deprived of the residue of my years.”

and John 5-25:

“Verily, verily, I say unto you; The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live.”

The brethren who built upon the simple esoteric work of operative Lodges the magnificent system of philosophy, life and morals which is our Freemasonry, wrought with the viewpoint of their times. Yet the abiding spirit of the ritual is a reality, otherwise it would not have lived in men’s hearts and worked its gentle miracles for so long a period. Apparently taking some somber pleasure from dwelling on mortality, decay, the evening of life, old age and death; these early Masonic ritualists nevertheless builded well when they endeavored to impress upon all brethren the vital importance of time. Indeed, time is so intimately interwoven in the degrees of Freemasonry (see Short Talk Bulletin, January, 1928) that it very obviously has a symbolic as well as moral significance.

Shakespeare wrote of “the inaudible and noiseless foot of time,” and “time the nurser and breeder of all good.” Richter denominated time “the chrysalis of eternity;” Franklin called it “the herb that cures all diseases.” Tusser said: “Time tries the truth in everything;” echoing Cicero’s “Time is the herald of truth.” Paine dug the meat from this nut in writing “Time makes more converts than reason.” Freemasonry’s ritual deals with time in a strictly limited sense; we speak of a definite number of years the temple was in building; of the days the Master was buried; of

the scythe of time, which cuts the brittle thread of life; of the hour glass which marks the passing of life. But in the symbolic sense Freemasonry makes of time a vast conception, allied with the very fundamentals of God and the hereafter. Her whole teaching is of the preparation for another and better life by a substantial and an honorable living of this one. Freemasonry makes a very clear distinction between everyday time, which all men share; - eight hours for labor, eight hours for God and a worthy brother, and eight hours for refreshment and sleep - and the time his immortal part must spend in the hereafter.

The scythe of time “cuts the brittle thread of life and launches us into eternity.” The immortal part of man “never, never, never, dies.” “Time, patience and perseverance will accomplish all things.” “Through the valley of the shadow of death, he may finally arise from the tomb of transgression to shine as the stars, forever and ever.”

Quotations might be multiplied; they will occur to all whom the ritual is familiar. Lucky the Master Mason who has grasped the deeper meanings of the hour glass and the scythe, and comforted is he who see behind their gloomy outlook a gleam of light; “In the night of death hope sees a star and love can hear the flutter of an angel’s wing,” as the great agnostic phrased it.”

The timelessness of time is a hard conception; that eternity has neither beginning nor ending is beyond the mental grasp even of great philosophers. Let a poet bring the unbringable within reach:

DURATION

Aweary of the endless days, my lot I wept

That life and love, too long, should pass so slow.

Some Power my eyelids touched, so that I slept

And stood upon a star. I saw below,

Alone in space, our tiny earthly sphere;

Its continents but islands in the deep;

Its tempest but a breeze; its mountains sheer,

Low hill; its oceans only ponds, asleep.

The northern ice revolved about a stone,

A mighty boulder, grim and great and high;

An hundred miles it stretched its length, moss-grown;

An hundred miles it towered to the sky
So rapid spun the giant pigmy world
Years sped as seconds. By some mighty Law
Ten centuries in empty space were hurled
As I drew breath. A little bird I saw
Which rubbed its beak against the rock. "See, there
He sharpens it, " a Voice said in my ear,
"Once every thousand years." I watched it wear
The granite down until a pole was clear.
When that gigantic task , by one small bird
In cycles of a thousand years. at last
Was done again the Silent Voice I heard:
"But one day of Eternity has passed!"
I woke; so much to do before day's end!
I heard the call to labor as a chime,
A song of instants I have yet to spend;
"Not life nor love is long, but only time!"