

# ILLUSTRATED BY SYMBOLS

The Most popular definition of Freemasonry states that it is "a System of morality, veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols."

Many a brother has asked "Why illustrated by symbols? Why not illustrated by plain statements of truth, completely defining the 'system of morality'?"

There are many answers. Among them is the truth that definition limits what is defined. Seldom has this been better expressed than by that philosopher who asked "Do you believe in God?" His answer: "Define what you mean by God. And when you have defined, no matter what your definition, I shall reply 'No, I do not believe in God, because a God defined is a God limited, and a limited God is no God!'"

All mathematics are written in symbols, since our digits are symbols for quantities. Algebra used a symbol for a symbol, expressing quantities by letters, instead of numbers.

In the algebraic equation " $a + b = c$ " any quantity may be assigned to any one, or any two of the letters and the equation still be true. Thus  $a + b = 4$  is true if  $a$  is equal 1 or  $b$  to 3: it is true if  $a$  and  $b$  are each equal to 2; it is true if  $a$  is equal to 3 and  $b$  to 1. But note that the replacing of a symbol by a known quantity limits the equation. Go a step further and replaced two symbols by two quantities; write that  $2 + b = 4$  and the necessity for  $b$  as a symbol disappears; it can only equal 2.

If you are so fortunate as to receive a blank check, signed, it may immediately become a symbol of almost anything; a new house, a yacht, a trip around the world, a valuable jewel. But if across the face of the blank check is stamped "Not over \$100" your symbol is limited. It can no longer represent any of these things. It can be a symbol of a new radio, a suit of clothes, a watch. If the check is filled in and reads "Ten Dollars" it becomes symbolic of only those things which can be bought for ten dollars.

There is a pretty story-its truth is not vouched for-that when a certain king came to this country for a difficult eye operation, the physician who operated was nonplussed as to what sort of bill to send. Should he charge a thousand dollars? He had done the operation for nothing, for a hundred dollars, for a thousand, even for ten thousand, depending on the ability of his patient to pay. But a king! A king wealthy, and a king who would have been blind without the operation.

The physician sent a bill reading:

To saving eyesight. The King can do no wrong.

To the king the bill became a symbol, a reminder of kingly wealth, of kingly gratitude, of kingly need to see. It is said that he sent a check for a half a million dollars!

It is thus seen that definition of a symbol limits its scope, and Freemasonry, by using symbols which are not closely defined, makes it possible for many men of many minds, each to read his own conception of the truth into the symbols. Freemasonry thus becomes as great a "System of morality" as the mind of him who attempts to understand it may admit.

In his introduction to Hunt's fine volume "Some thoughts on Masonic Symbolism" the late Jacob Hugo Tatche, noted student and Masonic historian wrote:

"Freemasonry permits each individual to interpret and apply the lessons of the Craft as he sees best. It is this unique spirit of tolerance and freedom which frequently confuses opponents of the Fraternity. One Mason places his interpretation upon a certain symbol or attribute of Freemasonry; another may take an entirely different view, and will cite evidence with which a third may be in entire variance; yet these three men can gather about our altars and labor together in perfect amity.

Long before Tatche, the great Albert Pike expressed the same thought in different language:

"Masonry . . . follows the ancient manner of teaching. Her symbols are the instructions she gives; and the lectures are but often partial and insufficient one-sided endeavors to interpret those symbols. He who would become an accomplished Mason must not be content merely to hear or even to understand the lectures, but must, aided by them, and they having as it were marked out the way for him study, interpret and develop the symbols for himself."

Many years ago, the present writer tried to express the reasons for symbols as illustrations of the system of morality by asking:

Why does Freemasonry veil in allegory and conceal in object or picture a meaning quite different from its name? Why should Freemasonry express immortality with acacia, brotherly love with a trowel, the world by a lodge, right living by a Mason's tools?

That Freemasonry conceals in symbols in order to arouse curiosity to know their meaning is often considered the only explanation. But there are many more lofty ideas of why this great system of truth, philosophy and ethics is hidden in symbols..

Man has a triple nature; he has a body, and senses which bring him into contact with, and translate the meanings of, the physical world of earth, air, fire and water which is about him. He has a brain and a mind by which he reasons and understands about the matters physical with which he is surrounded. and he has a Something Beyond; call it Soul, or Heart, or Spirit, or Imagination as you will; it is something which is allied to, rather than a part of, reason, and connected with the physical side of life only through its sensory contacts.

This soul or spirit comprehends a language which the brain does not understand. The keenest of minds have striven without success to make this mystic language plain to reason. When you hear music which brings tears to your eyes and grief or joy to your heart you respond to a language your brain does not understand and cannot explain. It is not with your brain that you love your

mother, your child or your wife; it is with the Something Beyond; and the language with which that love is spoken is not the language of the tongue.

A symbol is a word in that language. Translate that symbol into words which appeal only to the mind, and the spirit of the meaning is lost. Words appeal to the mind; meanings are expressed in words appeal to the spirit.

All that there is in Freemasonry which can be set down in words on a page leaves out completely the spirit of the Order. If we depend on words or ideas alone the Fraternity would not make a universal appeal to all men, since no man has it given to him to appeal to the minds of all other men. But Freemasonry expresses truths which are universal; it expresses them in a universal language, universally understood by all men without words. That language is the language of the symbol, and the symbol is universally understood because it is the means of communication between spirits, souls, hearts.

When we say of Masonry that it is universal we mean the word literally; it is of the universe, not merely of the world. If it were possible for an inhabitant of Mars to make and use a telescope which would enable him to see plainly a square mile of the surface of the earth, and if we knew it and desired by drawing upon that square mile a symbol to communicate with the inhabitants of Mars we would choose, undoubtedly, one with as many meanings as possible; one which had a material, a mental and a spiritual meaning. Such a symbol might be the Triangle, he might reply with the 47th problem. If we showed him a circle, he might set down 3.1416- the number by which a diameter multiplied becomes a circumference. We could find a language in symbols with which to begin communication even with all the universe!

Naturally then Freemasonry employs symbols for heart to speak to heart. Imagination is heart's collection of senses. So we must appeal to the imagination when speaking a truth which is neither mental or physical, and the symbol is the means by which one imagination speaks to another. Nothing else will do; no words can be as effective (unless they are themselves symbols); no teachings expressed in language can be as easily learned by the heart as those which come via the symbol through the imagination.

Take from Freemasonry its symbols and but the husk remains: the kernel is gone. He who hears but the words of Freemasonry misses their meaning entirely. Most symbols have many interpretations. These do not contradict but amplify each other. Thus, the square is a symbol of perfection, of rectitude of conduct, of honor and honesty, of good work. These are all different, and yet allied. The square is not a symbol of wrong, or evil, or meanness or disease. Ten different men may read ten different meanings into a square, and yet each meaning fits with, and belongs to the other meanings.

Ten men have ten different kinds of hearts. Not all have the same power of imagination, the same ability to comprehend. So each gets from a symbol what he can. He uses his imagination. He translates to his soul as much of the truth as he is able to make a part of him. This the ten cannot do with truths expressed in words. "Twice two is equal to four" is a truth which must be accepted all at once, as a complete exposition, or not at all. He who can understand but the "Twice" or the "equal" of the "four" has no conception of what is being said. But ten men can

read ten progressive, different, correct and beautiful meanings into a trowel, and each be right as far as he goes. The man who sees it merely as an instrument which helps to bind has a part of its meaning. He who finds it a link with operative Masons has another part. The man who sees it as a symbol of man's relationship to Deity, because with it he (spiritually) does the Master's work, has another meaning. All these meanings are right. When all men know all the meanings the need for Freemasonry will have passed away.

Freemasonry uses symbols because only by them can the Craft speak the language of the spirit, each to each, and because they form an elastic language, which each man reads for himself according to his ability. Symbols form the only language which is thus elastic, and the only one by which spirit can be touched. To suggest that Freemasonry use any other would be as revolutionary as to remove the Altars, meet in the public square or elect by a majority vote. Freemasonry without symbols would not be Freemasonry; it would be but dogmatic and not very erudite philosophy, of which the world is full as it is, and none of which ever satisfies the heart.

An undefined and therefore unlimited truth results from the slow growth in meaning of a symbol not tied down by confining words. The first flag was a skin raised on a banner that the savages of one tribe could tell their friends from their enemies. At first the skin but said "This is your tribe, do not slay us who carry it." But as skins gave way to banners and banners to flags, the meaning of the symbol grew. Today the American flag symbolizes far more than the thirteen original colonies (stripes) and the states of the union (stars). It stands for home. It stands for democracy. It stands for liberty, freedom, justice, religious tolerance. To one man it means merely his farm and his children. To another it means all the farms and all the children. To a third it means all that life holds which is dear. To others it means the hope of the world. Define it; say that it means only constitutional government, only an association of forty-eight states and under one president, legislature, judiciary, and it loses tremendously in value.

The Cross, now the symbol of Christianity the world over, was once a symbol of life; then it fell to the low estate of being but a means of a tortured death. Now it means love and hope and mercy and the infinite goodness of God; it means church and religion and faith and charity and all good works; it means salvation and heaven and the hereafter. And there will be many to testify that the more organized religion attempts to define it, the less beautiful and the less emphatic are its teachings.

Thus the reason for illustrating our "system of morality" by symbols, rather than by definitions, may be summed up; they symbol is as broad in meaning as the mind and heart which understand; the defined truth is no broader than its words. Freemasonry, universal in meaning and in content, can not be illustrated with anything less and still remain Freemasonry.

Seers seek for wisdom's flowers in the mind,

And write of symbols many a learned tome.

(Grow roses still, though rooted in black loam);

The mystic searches earth till eyes go blind

For soul of roses, yet what use to find  
A spirit penned within a catacomb?  
Nay, all they learn is weightless as sea-foam  
That drifts from wave to wave upon the wind,  
In rushes Cap and Bells. How very droll  
The ways of students and the foolish books!  
He finds no secrets of Freemasons' art  
In mind nor rose nor tomb nor musty scroll.  
Where no wit is, where all loves are, he looks  
And reads their hidden meaning in his heart.