

The Winding Staircase and Middle Chamber.

The Fellowcraft degree is a greatly misunderstood one. Possibly it would be more correct to say it is a greatly un-understood degree. We do not get the significance of the Fellowcraft degree -- we miss some of the most important lessons in Freemasonry when we do not give to this degree the same study that we give to the other degrees, when we do not give to it the study that places it in its rightful niche in the scheme of Freemasonry.

Instead of being a buffer degree, as it is so often considered to be -- instead of being something to bridge the gap between the beginning and completion of Craft Freemasonry -- the Fellowcraft degree presents opportunity for employment to the fullest of all the faculties of the most studious -- the most erudite -- and motivates us to make fullest use of those faculties.

While I wish not to be dogmatic, I have satisfied myself that as a matter of historical fact the Fellowcraft degree was once the ultimate in Freemasonry and was the highest degree until shortly after the formation of the first Grand Lodge in 1717. Its rituals part was included in the early Fellowcraft degree, and this part may have provided the framework for our present Master Mason degree. At any rate, it seems that the Entered Apprentice worked seven years with freedom, fervency and zeal, presented his Master's piece and became a Master or Fellow of the Craft and there was nothing higher. There seems no doubt that well toward the Grand Lodge period there was little ritual for the Master's or Fellowcraft part. It probably would be more accurate to speak of it in that early period as a grade, rather than a degree. Some time before the Grand Lodge period there seems to have been some ritual and the degree was infrequently conferred at district meetings.

There is authentic record that there were several times as many Entered Apprentices as Fellows of the Craft, and many Entered Apprentices never advanced from that degree. When, shortly after the formation of the First Grand Lodge, it appears the first part, i.e. the Masters part was taken out of the Fellowcraft degree and made a separate degree, it was for some years conferred only in Grand Lodge; The fellowcraft degree conferred usually, or at least frequently, in district meetings, and the Master Masons degree were the higher degrees. The manufacture of higher degrees as we know them had not yet started.

Proof that the Fellowcraft degree was one the ultimate is found in the fact that our three Principal officers wear as their jewels the working tools of the Fellowcraft degree. This fact indicates to me that these jewels were adopted when the fellowcraft was the ultimate and that the officers took these jewels with them when the Master Masons degree was added.

The fellowcraft degree may be embellished with anachronism, and certainly it is replete with inconsistency, and the candidate may be mystified by what may seem to him to be purposeless instruction and incident. That is my recollection as to the impression I got as a candidate, but through the years, although there are a few things I have not yet been able to explain to my entire satisfaction, I have become convinced there is nothing purposeless in Freemasonry. Anachronism and inconsistency should merely challenge the inquiring mind, which the fellowcraft degree is admirably designed to develop.

The more enigmatic the allegories and symbols, the greater the joy to come from their interpretation. View anachronism and inconsistency as merely a part of a vehicle which sustains the allegories and carries the symbolism by which beautiful lessons are inculcated, then anachronism and

inconsistency may be wholly and completely dissipated by disregarding the vehicle and giving attention to that with which the vehicle is freighted.

It is my purpose to discuss the Fellowcraft degree, first as I recollect it as having impressed me as a candidate, and then as it appears to me now as one who has given considerable time through the years to the study of Freemasonry. It seems to me an error to leave our votaries in complete or almost complete ignorance as to the place in Freemasonry of this degree.

I have said some believe it to be something sandwiched between the Entered Apprentice degree and the Master Mason degree but what is the filler in the middle of the sandwich? The meat. The Fellowcraft degree seems to me to be the meat of the Masonic sandwich. First I shall discuss briefly the principal allegory of the degree. If I develop any trivialism and inconsistency, I hope later to dissipate them.

In a manner familiar to all Fellowcrafts I received instruction relative to the Pillars, the several orders of architecture and the middle Chamber and was impressed with the importance of a study of the liberal arts and sciences, especially the noble science of Geometry. In my later years I have tried to recollect what all this meant to me as a candidate. My hazy recollection is that I thought there must be some significance to the Pillars, to the winding stairs, to the several orders of architecture, to the liberal arts and sciences to middle Chamber to the lodges and jewels of a Fellowcraft.

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Mason --- some mystery about them that I was not grasping at the moment. My recollection is that I was mystified and desired interpretation that I did not receive. I presume every Fellowcraft has been equally mystified by these scenes and received as little explanation as I did. Should we leave our votaries wondering what it is all about?

My hazy recollection is that I thought those conferring the degree and those sitting in the body of the Lodge - men whom I already knew - had not distinguished themselves by practising the lessons I was receiving. I can picture some of them even to-day after the passage of many years.

I can remember the scene, and I can remember the actors, but I can't remember becoming enthused about a study of the liberal arts and sciences --- about the several orders of architecture --- about the wages and jewels of a Fellowcraft - and I know from my daily association with them than I did who had just become a Fellowcraft - possibly, not so much. I wondered how I was to become informed, but, being an average Freemason, I soon followed the example of those who had gone before me and ceased to be even curious as to the meanings of the things that had puzzled and intrigued me. Are we fair to our votaries when we present the ~~beauties~~ beauties of the Fellowcraft degree to them and then provide no way by which they may enjoy those beauties? Are we Freemasons of many years doing our part to see that new Freemasons get out of the Fellowcraft degree what is there? Are we even getting out of it what there is for us?

at the time I became a Fellowcraft and for many years afterward, I accepted as literal truth everything I had heard about King Solomon, and the things, supposed to have happened while the Temple was building. Fact and fancy are so cleverly interwoven, so cleverly intertwined, that I accepted all as a fact.

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When the pillars were explained to me, the inconsistencies in their description did not occur to me. It did not occur to me that no one living in the time of King Solomon had ever even heard of the ~~the~~ continents of the western hemisphere and had no idea of the shape of the continents which they knew to exist. It did not occur to me that it was 24 centuries later the Columbus decided to prove that the world was round and thereby discovered America.

It seems to me that, early in the life of a fellowcraft, we should teach him not to worry about inconsistencies and should explain the purposes of the various inaccuracies in the degree he has received.

No one to day is certain what purpose the Pillars served, or what they represented. If they were largely ornamental, weren't they symbols of some Freemasons of to-day? If the Pillars were repositories, as it has been suggested to us, no way was provided for getting to and using the information they contained. That sounds ridiculous, but don't we to-day refuse to make use of information we know to exist?

When I first learned what we may read in any description of the Fellowcraft degree, that on pay day 80,000 Fellowcrafts climbed a narrow staircase to the Middle Chamber and carried away a great bulk in wages, my recollection is that, I was considerably mystified. I haven't yet learned anything about allegories. The temple, not as large as some Lodge Temples we have to-day, could not have cared for more than a small part of the 80,000 persons, wouldn't we be happy to-day if we could have crowds of that size trying to crowd their way into our Temples on meeting nights?

I have given some of my impressions as a candidate as I now recollect them and I have done little except to point out inconsistency. I shall now tell you some of the things which have come to me through the years. I shall attempt to dissipate the inconsistency I have developed, and I may astound you with my initial statement, that to me, the Winding Staircase and Middle Chamber are wholly and completely philosophic myths. There is nothing historical to indicate they ever existed as a physical part of the Temple, but as symbols, ah that is something else. They are merely a part

of a pretty allegory. They are necessary as the vehicle by which the allegory is sustained. My fault as a candidate, and through many years was that I gave all my attention to the vehicle and failed to see that with which the vehicle was freighted. Physically to me, the winding staircase and middle chamber are philosophic myths, but as symbols they are very real and have a charm of their own. They are among the most important symbols of Freemasonry. They hold lessons that have become apparent to far too few of us.

Many times in later years I have wondered what other candidates have thought as they acted their part in the Principal Allegory of the Fellowcraft degree. I have wondered, whether through the years, they have taken time to disillusion their minds of such things as those that crowded them ~~down~~ into mine. I have wondered whether they have brushed aside historic and anachronic inaccuracies to discover priceless gems of symbolism. Let us proceed to do that.

The fellowcraft degree now becomes a glorification of education - the acquiring of knowledge. Haven't we been impressed with the importance of a study of the liberal arts and sciences? What is meant by that except to admonish us to seek knowledge. In the years have hurried by, I have learned that the seven liberal arts and sciences are not the septa-headed dragon that, as a candidate they seemed to me to be. Grammar, rhetoric, ^{logic} arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy. Few masons may hope to become versed in all of these and Freemasonry does not ask that they shall. On the other hand, it would be impossible to become educated without drawing from several of these liberal arts and sciences particularly grammar, logic, rhetoric and ~~grammar~~ arithmetic. Many of us make daily use of these four without realising that we are doing so. My original conception of the liberal arts and sciences as something formidable was not long ago dissipated.

The Fellowcraft has advanced from the Entered Apprentices degree, symbolic of youth, and stands on the threshold of the Master Mason's degree, symbolic of later life. The fellow-craft degree, therefore, is symbolic of middle life - the period of effort and study - the period that should be the one of greatest mental activity the period for accomplishment. It is possible that the time taken to impress the candidate with the importance of the study of the liberal arts and sciences, and of the making use of the knowledge therein contained, is wasted upon many. Possibly the Allegory of the winding Stairs has led few to such study but Freemasonry has done its part. It has provided and it has furnished the vehicle. It has done its utmost to create in its votaries a desire for knowledge. Certainly the Allegory of the winding Stairs teaches that study of the liberal arts and sciences - that increase of knowledge - - leads onward and upward. There hardly could be a more important lesson in Freemasonry or elsewhere.

What do the winding Stair and Middle Chamber symbolise to other Fellowcrafts? That I can not know. That is for each to determine for himself. To me they symbolise everything desirable in Freemasonry and even more - ascent from a lower level to a higher level known only to Freemasons - ascent from the darkness of ignorance to the light of knowledge - ascent from error to truth - ascent from death to life - progress from adolescence through active years of middle life when attention must be given to acquiring those things which bring security, joy and contentment in the mellow years of age - - development of friendships - - increase of knowledge all the better - nobler and desirable things of life and of Freemasonry.

The fact that the winding staircase teaches us that we must strive upward by devious ways - that we must strive upward step by step - that we must strive upward to an unknown goal - that we must strive upward toward light, knowledge and success without looking backward to the darkness, ignorance and failures of the past.

The division of the stairs into three, five and seven steps teaches us that through successful conclusion of one task we have merely prepared ourselves for a greater task.

A straight stairway hides neither danger, nor secret, nor mystery, but the winding stairs of life lead to we know not where, for some to a Middle Chamber of fame and fortune for others to a Middle Chamber of pain and frustration. The Winding Staircase symbolise that place at which we hope to arrive by our own endeavours, a virtuous education and the blessings of God.

The wages of a Fellowcraft teach me that we shall be rewarded according to our deserts, - that greater efforts bring greater rewards - that by honest toil we provide ourselves with the nourishment which our efforts have made necessary, - with the refreshments to which our efforts entitle us - with the joy that comes from the knowledge of a task well done. Fellowcrafts should remember that it is not so much what or how much we get out of it as what we do with it after we get it.

Some other brother may find something relative to the Winding Stairs and Middle Chamber that has escaped me where I have searched. He is not restricted to what I have found, nor to what any other brother finds, nor to what he himself finds nor to one interpretation of a symbol or an allegory, nor can he to himself say that he has discovered the full meaning of any symbol or allegory. Masons newly made and those who have labored for years within the Tyled Circle are

losing much of the beauty of Freemasonry when they do not touch aside the veil of Allegory and by their own efforts give life and vitality to the truths immemorial and eternal which have been presented to them in the Fellowcraft degree.

We should follow the Winding Stairs to hidden knowledge in the Middle Chamber, Regardless of what interpretation I may give, or any other brother may give ---- to the Winding Stairs, they should at least lead us Somewhere - possibly to the Middle Chamber of Spiritual building - possibly to a fuller appreciation --- a better understanding --- of the beauties of the neglected misunderstood or under. understood Fellowcraft degree.

There is a Middle Chamber. There are wages of a Fellowcraft Mason.

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