

Although the legend of the Winding Stairs forms an important tradition of Ancient Craft Masonry, the only allusion to it in scripture is to be found in a single verse in the 6th Chapter of the 1st Book of Kings, and is in these words:- "THE DOOR OF THE MIDDLE CHAMBER WAS IN THE RIGHT SIDE OF THE HOUSE; AND THEY WENT UP WITH WINDING STAIRS INTO THE MIDDLE CHAMBER, AND OUT OF THE MIDDLE INTO THE THIRD. Out of this slender material has been constructed an allegory, which, if properly considered in its symbolical relations, will be found to be of surpassing beauty.

In the investigation of the true meaning of every Masonic symbol and allegory, we must be governed by the single principle that the whole design of Freemasonry as a speculative science is the investigation of DIVINE TRUTH. The Mason is, from the moment of his initiation as an Entered Apprentice, an investigator - a labourer in the quarry and the Temple - whose reward is to see TRUTH. This principle of Masonic symbolism is apparent in many places in each of the degrees. In that of the Entered Apprentice we find it developed in the theological ladder, which, resting on earth, leans its top upon Heaven, thus inculcating the idea of an ascent from a lower to a higher sphere, as the objects of Masonic labour.

The Apprentice, having entered within the porch of the Temple, has begun his Masonic life. But the first degree in Masonry, like the lesser Mysteries of the ancient systems of initiation, is only a preparation and purification for something higher. The lessons which he receives are simply intended to cleanse the heart and prepare the recipient for that mental illumination which is to be given in the succeeding degrees. As a Fellow Craft he has advanced another step, and as the degree is emblematic of youth, so it is here that the intellectual education of the Candidate begins. And, therefore, here, at the very spot which separates the Porch from the Sanctuary, where childhood ends and manhood begins, he finds stretching out before him a winding stair which invites him, as it were, to ascend, and which, as the symbol of discipline and instruction, teaches him that here must commence his Masonic labours - here he must enter upon those glorious though difficult researches, the end of which is to be the possession of Divine Truth.

As to the particular number of stairs, this has varied at different periods. Tracing boards of the eighteenth century have been found, in which only FIVE steps are delineated, and others in which they amount to SEVEN. In this country the number FIFTEEN was decided upon, divided into three series of THREE, FIVE and SEVEN. The Candidate in the second degree of Masonry, represents a man starting forth on the journey of LIFE, with the great task before him of self-improvement. The Candidate, incited by the love of virtue and the desire of knowledge, and eager for the reward of truth which is set before him, begins at once the toilsome ascent. At each division he pauses to gather instruction from the symbolism which these divisions present to his attention.

At the first pause he is instructed in the peculiar organisation of the Order of which he has become a member. THREE MAKE A LODGE: FIVE HOLD A LODGE: SEVEN OR MORE MAKE IT PERFECT. The reference to the organisation of the Masonic institution is intended to remind the aspirant of the union of men in society, the blessings which arise from civilisation, and the fruits of virtue and knowledge which are derived from that condition. The invention of ARCHITECTURE, in its FIVE ORDERS, as a means of providing convenient dwellings and necessary shelter are then referred to. In this second pause in the ascent of the Winding Stairs, the aspirant is therefore reminded of the necessity of cultivating practical knowledge.

In his third pause he arrives at that point in which the whole circle of human science is to be explained. In ancient times the circle of instruction, to which all the learning of the most eminent schools and most distinguished philosophers was confined, was limited to what was then called THE LIBERAL ARTS AND SCIENCES; GRAMMAR; RHETORIC; LOGIC; ARITHMETIC; GEOMETRY; MUSIC and ASTRONOMY. These seven heads were supposed to include all universal knowledge, and to be a master of these was sufficient to complete the character of a philosopher. The Candidate having reached this point is now supposed to have accomplished the task upon which he had entered. He has reached the last step, and is now ready to receive the full fruition of human learning.

It will be remembered that a reward was promised for all this toilsome ascent of the Winding Stairs - the wages of a Fellow Craft - to be received in the Middle Chamber. What are the wages of a Speculative Mason? Not money, nor corn, nor wine, nor oil. All these are but symbols. His Wages are TRUTH, and that Truth will consist only in a perfect knowledge of T.G.A.O.T.U. In this consists the Wages of a Fellow Craft; he is directed to the Truth, but must travel further and ascend still higher to attain it.

It is then, as a symbol, and a symbol only, that we must study this beautiful legend of the Winding Stairs. It is a allegory to teach us the ascent of the mind from ignorance, through all the toils of study and the difficulties of obtaining knowledge, until, in the Middle Chamber of Life, in the full fruition of manhood, the reward is attained and the purified and elevated intellect is invested with the reward, in the direction of how to see GOD and GOD's Truth. And so we may close with this theory:

THE FELLOW CRAFT REPRESENTS A MAN LABOURING IN THE PURSUIT OF TRUTH; AND THE WINDING STAIRS ARE THE DEVIOUS PATHWAYS OF THAT PURSUIT.

Let us therefore supplicate the Grand Geometrician of the Universe, that the rays of Heaven may shed their influence to enlighten us in the paths of virtue and science. So mote it be.