

The Legend of the Winding Stairs

In an investigation of the symbolism of the winding stairs, we shall be directed to the true explanation by a reference to their origin, their number, the objects which they recall, and their termination, but above all by a consideration of the great design which an assent upon them was intended to accomplish.

The steps of this winding staircase commenced we are informed, at the porch of the Temple; that is to say, at its very entrance. But nothing is more undoubted in the science of Masonic symbolism than that the Temple was the representative of the world purified by the Divine Presence. The world of the profane is without the Temple; the world of the initiated is within its sacred walls. Hence to enter the Temple, to pass within the porch, to be made a mason, and to be born into the world of Masonic light, are all synonymous terms. Here, then, the symbolism of the winding stairs begins.

The Apprentice having entered within the porch of the temple, has begun his Masonic life. But the first degree in masonry, is only a preparation and purification for something higher. The Entered Apprentice is the child in Masonry. 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 labour — here he must enter upon those glorious though difficult researches the end of which is to be in the possession of divine truth. The winding stairs begin after the candidate has passed within the porch and between the pillars of strength and establishment, as a significant symbol to teach him that as soon as he has passed beyond the years of irrational childhood, and commenced his entrance upon manly life, the laborious task of self-improvement is the first duty placed before him. He cannot stand still; his destiny requires him to ascend, step by step, until he has reached the summit, where the treasures of knowledge await him.

The numbers of these steps in all the systems is odd. The coincidence is at least curious — that the ancient temples were always ascended by an odd number of steps; so that commencing with the right foot at the bottom, the worshipper would find the same foot foremost when he entered the temple, which was considered as a fortunate omen. But the fact is, that the symbolism of numbers was borrowed by the masons from Pythagoras, in whose system of philosophy it plays an important part, and in which odd numbers were considered as more perfect than even ones. Hence, throughout the Masonic system we find a predominance of odd numbers, and while three, five, seven, and nine, are all-important symbols, we seldom find a reference to two, four, six, or eight. The odd number of stairs was therefore intended to symbolise the idea of perfection, to which it was the object of the aspirant to attain.

As to the particular number of the stairs, this has varied at different periods. The Tracing-boards of the nineteenth century have been found, in which only five steps are delineated, and others in which they amount to seven. The prestonian lectures, used at the beginning of the century gave the whole number of thirty-eight. The error of making an even number, which was a violation of the Pythagorean principle of odd numbers as the symbol of perfection, was later corrected. At the union of the two Grand Lodges of England the number was reduced to fifteen, divided into three series of *three, five, and seven*.

At the first pause which he makes he is instructed in the peculiar organisation of the order of which he has become a member. But the information here given, is barren, and unworthy of his labour. The rank of the officers, and the required number can give no knowledge which he has not before possessed. We must look therefore to the symbolic meaning of these allusions for any value which may be attached to this part of the ceremony.

The reference to the organisation of the Masonic institution is intended to remind us of the union of men in society, and the development of the social state out of the state of nature. He is thus reminded, in the very outset of his journey, of the blessings which arise from civilisation, and of the fruits of virtue and knowledge which are derived from that condition. Masonry itself is the result of civilisation; while, in grateful return, it has been one of the most important means of extending that condition to mankind.

All the monuments of antiquity prove that as man emerged from the savage to the social state then came the invention of architecture. As architecture developed as a means of providing convenient dwellings and necessary shelter from the harshness of the seasons, with the mechanical arts connected with it, for as we began to erect solid and more stately edifices of stone, they imitated the parts which necessity had introduced into the primitive huts. and adapted them to their temples, which, although at first simple and rude, were in the course of time, and by the ingenuity of succeeding architects, wrought and improved to such a degree of perfection on different models, that each was by way of eminence, denominated an order of architecture.

Advancing in his progress the candidate is invited to contemplate another series of instructions. The human senses, as the appropriate channels through which we receive all our ideas of perception, and which, therefore, constitute the most important sources of our knowledge, are here referred to as a symbol of intellectual cultivation. Architecture, as the most important of the arts which conduce to comfort of mankind, is also alluded to here, not simply because it is closely connected with operative instruction of Masonry, but also as the type of all the other useful arts. In his second pause, in the ascent of the winding stairs, the aspirant is therefore reminded of the necessity of cultivating practical knowledge.

So far, then the instructions he has received relate to his own condition in society as a member of the great social compact, and to his means of becoming, by a knowledge of the arts of practical life, a necessary and useful member of society. Still must he go onward and forward. the stair is still before him; its summit is not yet reached, and further wisdoms are to be sought for, or the reward will not be gained, nor the *middle chamber* the abiding-place of truth, be reached.

In his third pause, he therefore arrives at that point in which the whole circle of human science is to be explained. Symbols, we know, are in themselves arbitrary and of conventional signification, and the complete circle of human science might have been as well symbolised by any other sign or series of doctrines as by the seven liberal arts and sciences. But Masonry is an institution of olden time; and this selection of the liberal arts and sciences as a symbol of the completion of human learning is one of the most pregnant evidences that we have of its antiquity.

In the seventh century, and for a long time afterwards, the circle of instruction to which all the learning of the most eminent schools and most distinguished philosophers was confined, was limited to what were then called the liberal arts and sciences, and consisted of two branches, the *trivium* and the *quadrivium*. The *trivium* included grammar, rhetoric, and logic; the *quadrivium* comprehended arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy. These seven arts were supposed to include universal knowledge. He who was master of these was thought to have no need of a preceptor to explain any books or to solve any question which lay within the compass of human reason, the knowledge of the *trivium* having furnished him with the key to all language, and that of the *quadrivium* having opened to him the secret laws of nature.

But we are not yet done. It will be remembered that a reward was promised for all this toilsome ascent of the winding stairs. Now, 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, or the approximation to which it will be most appropriate to the degree into which he has been initiated. It is one of the most beautiful, but at the same time most abstruse, doctrines of the science of Masonic symbolism that the Mason is ever to be in search of truth, but is never to find it. This divine truth, the object of all his labours, is symbolised by the Word, for which we all know he can only obtain a substitute; and this is intended to teach the humiliating but necessary lesson that the knowledge of nature, of God, and of man's relation to them, which knowledge constitutes divine truth, can never be acquired in this life. Only at the end of this life shall he know the origin of life.

The middle chamber is therefore symbolic of this life, where the symbol only of the Word can be given, where the truth is to be reached by approximation only, and yet where we are to learn that truth will consist in a perfect knowledge of the G.G.O.T.U. This is the reward of the inquiring Mason; in this consist the wages of a Fellow Craft; he is directed to the truth, but he must travel farther and ascend still higher to attain it.

It is then, as a symbol, and as a symbol only, that we must study this beautiful legend of the winding stairs. If we attempt to adopt it as a historical fact, the absurdity of its details stares us in the face, and wise men will wonder at our credulity. Its inventors had no desire to thus impose upon our folly; but offering it to us as a great philosophical myth, they did not for a moment suppose that we would pass over its sublime moral teachings to accept the allegory as a historical narrative without meaning, and wholly irreconcilable with the records of Scripture, and opposed by all the principles of probability. To suppose that eighty thousand craftsmen were weekly paid in the narrow precincts of the Temple chambers, is simply to suppose an absurdity. But to believe that all this pictorial representation of an ascent by a winding staircase to the place where the wages of labour were received, was an allegory to teach us the ascent of the mind from ignorance, through all the toils of study and the difficulties of obtaining knowledge, receiving here a little and there a little, adding something to the stock of our ideas at each step, 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 how to seek truth and knowledge; to believe this, is to believe and to know the true design of Speculative Masonry, the only design which makes it worthy of a good and wise man's study

One step at a time.