

THE APRON THE GOLDEN BOWL AND THE SILVER CORD

Being Extracts from the Forthcoming Book

By

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"Blue Lodge Masonry"

Submitted by

the Research Committee of the Grand Lodge of Iowa, A.F. & A.M.

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FOREWARD

Many books have been written on the subject of Masonry, its history, symbolism and philosophy. It might seem that there was no room for another, but a little reflection will show that Masonry is a great fountain of truth, continually springing up like new waters to refresh the weary seeker. It has many an avenue yet to be explored; many a depth yet to be sounded. It has its appeal to every degree of taste and intelligence. It has light to shed on every problem of life.

The purpose of Brother Haywood's book is to present the symbolism of Masonry in simple language, and at the same time adapt it to the Masonic student. It is especially designed for Lodge Study Clubs, with the hope that it may help them to have a better understanding of the relation of Masonry to the problems of life. The extracts here given will show his method of handling the subject and we trust will stimulate a desire for further light in Masonry.

N.R. Parvin,
Grand Secretary

For one purpose or another, and in some form, the Apron has been used for three or four thousand years. In at least one of the Ancient Mysteries, that of Mithras, the candidate was invested with a white Apron. So also was the initiate of the Essenes, who received it during the first year of his membership in that order, and it is significant that many of the statues of Greek and Egyptian gods were so ornamented, as may still be seen. Chinese secret societies, in many cases, also used it, and the Persians, at one time, employed it as their national banner. Jewish prophets often wore aprons, as ecclesiastical dignitaries of the present day still do. The same custom is found even among savages, for, as Brother J.G. Gibson has remarked, "Wherever the religious sentiment remains — even among the savage nations of the earth — there has been noticed the desire of the natives to wear a girdle or apron of some kind."

From all this, however, we must not infer that our Masonic Apron has come to us from such sources, though, for all we know, the early builder may have been influenced by those ancient and universal customs. The fact seems to be that the Operative masons used the Apron only for the practical purpose of protecting the clothing, as there was need in labor so rough. It was nothing more than one item of the workman's necessary equipment as is shown by Brother W.H. Rylands, who found an Indenture of 1685 in which a Master contracted to supply his Apprentice with "sufficient wholesome and competent meate, drink, lodging and Aprons."

Because the Apron was so conspicuous a portion of the Operative Mason's costume, and so persistent a portion of his equipment, it was inevitable that Speculatives should have continued its use for symbolical purposes. The earliest known representatives of these, we are informed by Brother J.F. Crowe, who was one of the first of our scholars to make a thorough and scientific investigation of the subject (A.Q.C., vol 5, p.29), "is an engraved portrait of Anthony Sayer... Only the upper portion is visible in the picture, but the flap is raised, and the apron looks like a very long leathern skin. The next drawing is in the frontispiece to the Book of Constitution, published in 1723, where a brother is represented as bringing a number of aprons and gloves into the lodge, the former appearing of considerable size and with long strings." In Hogarth's cartoon "Night", drawn in 1737, the two Masonic figures, Crowe points out in another connection (see his "Things a Freemason should know"), "have aprons reaching to their ankles." But other plates, of the same period, show aprons reaching only to the knee, thus marking the beginning of that process of shortening, and of general decrease in size and change in shape, which finally gave us

the Apron of the present day; for since the garment no longer serves as a means of protection it has been found wise to fashion it in a manner more convenient to wear, not is this inconsistent with its original Masonic significance. It is this fact, as I have already suggested, that has made the present form of the Apron a result of circumstances, and proves how groundless are the interpretations founded on its shape.

According to Blue Lodge usages in the United States the Apron must be of unspotted lambskin, 14 to 16 inches in width, 12 to 14 inches in depth, with a flap descending from the top some 3 or 4 inches. The Grand Lodge of England now specifies such an Apron as this for the First Degree, but requires the Apron of the Second Degree to have two sky-blue rosettes at the bottom and that of the Third Degree to have in addition to that a sky blue lining and edging not more than two inches deep, "and an additional rosette on the fall or flap, and silver tassels." Grand Officers are permitted to use other ornaments, gold embroidery, and, in some cases, crimson edgings. All the evidence goes to show that these ornate Aprons are of recent origin. The Apron should always be worn outside the coat.

2. — The Badge of a Mason.

"The thick-tanned hide, girt around him with thongs, wherein the Builder builds, and at evening sticks his trowel" was so conspicuous a portion of the costume of the operative mason that it became associated with him in the public mind, and this gradually evolved into his badge; for a badge is some mark voluntarily assumed as the result of established custom whereby one's work, or station, or school of opinion, may be signified.

Of what is the mason's badge a mark? Surely its history permits but one answer to this — it is the mark of honorable and conscientious labor, the labor that is devoted to creating, to constructing rather than to destroying or demolishing. As such, the Mason's Apron is itself a symbol of profound change in the attitude of society toward work, for the labor of hand and brain, once despised by the great of the earth, is rapidly becoming the one badge of an honorable life. If men were once proud to wear a sword, while leaving the tasks of life to slaves and menials, if they once sought titles and coats of arms as emblems of distinction, they are now, figuratively speaking, eager to wear the Apron, for the Knight of the present day would rather save life than take it, and prefers, a thousand times over, the glory of achievement

to the glory of title or name. Truly, "the rank has become the guinea's stamp, and a man's a man for a' that," especially if he be a man that can DO; and the real modern king, as Carlyle was always contending, is "the man who can."

I this is the message of the Apron, none has a better right to wear it than a Mason, if he be a real member of the Craft, for his is a Knight of labor if ever there was one. Not all labor deals with things. There is a labor of the mind, and of the spirit, more arduous, often, and more difficult, than any labor of the hands. He who dedicates himself to the cleaning of the Augean stables of the world, to the clearing away of the rubbish that litters the paths of life, to the fashioning of building stones in the confused quarries of mankind, is entitled, more than any man, to wear the badge of toil!

3. — An Emblem of Innocence and Sacrifice.

When the Candidate is invested with the garment he is told that it is an emblem of innocence. It is doubtful if Operative Lodges ever used it for such a symbolic purpose, though they may have done so in the Seventeenth Century, after Speculatives began to be received in greater numbers. The evidence indicates that it was after the Grand Lodge era, and in consequence of the rule that the Apron should be of white lambskin, that Masons began to see in its color an emblem of innocence and in its texture a suggestion of sacrifice.

In so doing they fell into line with ancient practices for of old, white "has been esteemed an emblem of innocence and purity." Among the Romans an accused person would sometimes put on a garment of white to attest his innocence, white being, as Cicero phrased it, "most acceptable to the gods." The candidates in the Mysteries and among the Essenes were similarly invested, and it has the same meaning of purity and innocence in the Bible which promises that though our sins be as scarlet they shall be white as snow. In the early Christian church the young catechumen (or convert) robed himself in white in token of his abandonment of the world and his determination to lead a blameless life. But there is no need to multiply instances for each of us feels by instinct that white is the natural symbol of innocence.

Now it happens that "innocence" comes from a word meaning "to do no hurt" and this may well be taken as its Masonic definition, for it is evident that no grown man can be innocent in the sense that a child is, which really means an ignorance of evil. The INNOCENCE of a Mason is

his gentleness, his chivalrous determination to do no moral evil to any person, man, or woman, or babe; his patient forbearance of the crudeness and ignorance of men; his charitable forgiveness of his brethren when they wilfully or unconsciously do him evil; his dedication to a spiritual knighthood in behalf of the values and virtues of humanity by which alone man rises above the brute, and the world is carried forward on the upward way.

It is in token of its texture - lambskin - that we find in the Apron the further significance of sacrifice, and this also, it seems, is a symbolism developed since 1700. It has been generally believed until recently, that the Operatives used only leather aprons, and this was doubtless the case in the early days, but Crowe has shown that many of the oldest Lodge records evidence a use of linen as well. "In the old Lodge of Melrose," he writes, "dating back to the Seventeenth Century, the aprons have always been of linen, and the same rule obtained in 'Mary's Chapel' No. 1, Edinburgh, the oldest Lodge in the world; whilst Brother James Smithy, in his history of the old Dumfries Lodge, writes, 'on inspecting the box of Lodge 53, there was only one apron of kid or leather, the rest being of linen.' As these Lodges are of greater antiquity than any in England, I think a fair case is made out for linen, versus leather, originally."

It can not be said, however, that Brother Crowe has entirely made out his case, for other authorities contend that the builders who necessarily handled rough stone and heavy timbers must have needed a more substantial fabric than linen or cotton. But in any event, the Fraternity has been using leather Aprons for these two centuries, though cotton cloth is generally substituted for ordinary Lodge purposes, and it is in no sense far-fetched to see in the lambskin a hint of that sacrifice of which the lamb has so long been an emblem.

But what do we mean by sacrifice? To answer this fully would lead us far afield into ethics and theology, but for our present purpose, we may say that the Mason's sacrifice is the cheerful surrender of all that is in him which is unmasonic. If he has been too proud to meet others on the level he must lay aside his pride; if he has been too mean to act upon the square he must yield up his meanness; if he has been guilty of corrupting habits they must be abandoned, else his wearing of the Apron be a fraud and a sham.

Carrying with it so rich a freightage of symbolism the Apron may justly be considered "more ancient than the Golden Fleece or Roman Eagle, more honorable than the Star and Garter," for these badges were too

often nothing more than devices of flattery and the insignia of an empty name. The Golden Fleece was an Order of Knighthood founded by Philip, Duke of Burgundy, on the occasion of his marriage to the Infanta Isabella of Portugal in 1429 or 1430. It used a Golden Ram for its badge and the motto inscribed on its jewel was "Wealth, not servile labor!" The Romans of old bore an eagle on their banners to symbolize magnanimity, fortitude, swiftness, and courage. The Order of the Star originated in France in 1350, being founded by John II in imitation of the order of the Garter; of the last named Order it is difficult to speak, as its origin is clothed in so much obscurity that historians differ, but it was as essentially aristocratic as any of the others. In every case, the emblem was a token of aristocratic idleness and aloofness, the opposite of that symbolized by the Apron; and the superiority of the latter over the former is too obvious for comment.

SCRIPTURE LESSON

Eccl. XII: 1-8

1. Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them:
2. While the sun, or the light, or the moon, or the stars, be not darkened, nor the clouds return after the rain:
3. In the day when the keepers of the house shall tremble, and the strong men shall bow themselves, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those that look out of the windows be darkened,
4. And the doors shall be shut in the streets, when the sound of the grinding is low, and he shall rise up at the voice of the bird, and all the daughters of music shall be brought low:
5. Also when they shall be afraid of that which is high, and fears shall be in the way, and the almond tree shall flourish, and the grasshopper shall be a burden, and desire shall fail: because man goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets:
6. Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern.
7. Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return to God who gave it.

THE GOLDEN BOWL AND THE SILVER CORD

The sacred sentences which fall on the ears of the candidate as he makes his mystic round are so heavy with poignant beauty that one hesitates to intrude the harsh language of prose upon such strains of poetry, solemn sweet. We may well believe that the men who introduced the reading here had no other thought than that the words might the better create an atmosphere in which the coming drama of hate and doom might all the more impressively come home to the heart of the participants. If such was their purpose neither Shakespeare nor Dante could have found words or sentiments more appropriate to the hour. There is a music and majesty in the twelfth chapter of Ecclesiastes which leaves us dumb with awe and wonder and our hearts open to the impressions of a tragedy alongside which the doom of Lear seems insignificant and vain.

For generations the commentators of Holy Writ have seen in the allegory of this chapter a reference to the decay of the body and the coming of death; to them, the golden bowl was the skull, the silver cord was the spinal nerve, "the keepers of the house" were the hands, the "strong men" the limbs; the whole picture is made to symbolize the body's falling into ruin and the approach of death. One hesitates to differ from an interpretation so true in its application and so dignified by its associations. But it must be doubted whether the sad and disillusioned man who penned the lines possessed either the knowledge of human anatomy implied by the old interpretation or the intention to make his poem into a medical description of senility.

A more thorough scholarship has come to see in the allegory a picture of the horror of death set forth by metaphors drawn from an Oriental thunderstorm.

It had been a day of wind and cloud and rain; but the clouds did not, as was usual, disperse after the shower. They returned again and covered the heavens with their blackness. Thunderstorms were so uncommon in Palestine that they always inspired fear and dread, as many a paragraph in the Scriptures will testify. As the storm broke the strong men guarding the gates of rich men's houses began to tremble; the hum of the little mills where the women were always grinding at even time suddenly ceased because the grinders were frightened from their toil; the women, imprisoned in the harems, who had been gazing out of the lattice to watch the activities of the streets, drew back into their dark rooms; even the revelers, who had been sitting about their tables through the afternoon, eating dainties and sipping wine, lost

their appetites, and many were made so nervous that the sudden twittering of a bird would cause them to start with anxious surprise.

As the terror of the storm, the poet goes on to say, so is the coming of death, when man "goes to his home of everlasting and mourners go about the streets." Whatever men may have been, good or bad, death beings equal terror to all. A man may have been rich, like the golden lamp hung on a silver chain in the palace of a king; he may have been as poor as the earthen pitcher in which maidens carried water from the public well, or even as crude as the heavy wooden wheel wherewith they drew the water; what his state was matters not, death is as dread a calamity to the one as to the other. When that dark adventure comes the fine possessions in which men had sought security will be vain to stay the awful passing into night. "Vanity of vanities; all is vanity." The one bulwark against the common calamity, the Preacher urges, is to remember the Creator, yea, to remember Him from youth to old age; to believe that one goes to stand before Him is the one and only solace in an hour when everything falls to ruin and the very desire to live has been quenched by the ravages of age and the coming of death.