



Paper

Cable-Tow

Index

An explanation of the use of the Cable-Tow.

Summary

An understanding of the use and meaning of the cable-tow both materially and morally.

Keywords

First, Second, Third, Cable-Tow

The Cable

The word 'cable' appears several times in the Ritual and would seem to have a number of different meanings: -

- First, in the Ceremony of Initiation the Candidate is prepared by having a cable-tow placed around his neck (something which he later states himself in the questions before being passed to the Second-Degree). This, as we all remember, is a length of rope formed into a running noose, which the Candidate is later told would have rendered any attempt at retreat fatal!
- Second, at a later stage in his Initiation reference is made to a point in the sea '*a cable's length from the shore*'.
- Third, during his obligation in the Third-Degree the Candidate promises '*to answer and obey all lawful signs and summonses sent to me from a Master Mason's Lodge if within the length of my cable-tow*'.

In the First Degree, the cable-tow has a primarily practical purpose which is defined in the ritual. It is a noose or halter, a symbol which would have been recognised in the past, but which today is almost unknown. From time immemorial, a noose or halter has been a symbol of captivity, serfdom or slavery. Conquerors in the ancient and mediaeval worlds obliged the leaders of a defeated people to come before them wearing halters. For example, in the First Book of Kings, when the Israelites had defeated the Syrians, the Syrian servants said: '*Let us, I pray thee, put sackcloth on our loins, and ropes upon our heads, and go out to the King of Israel: peradventure he will save thy life*'. In 1347, the burghers of Calais appeared before King Edward III of England in their shirts, each with a halter round his neck, in full recognition that they were at his mercy, after he had captured their town. In 1517, on what became known as '*Evil May Day*', many citizens of London who had attacked foreigners living there were taken prisoner and brought before King Henry VIII bound together in their shirts and with halters around their necks.

As recently as the 19th century, many poor and uneducated people living in England believed that a man might lawfully sell his wife to another man, providing he deliver her with a halter around her neck!

In Freemasonry, the earliest allusion to a rope being used in the preparation of Candidates appears in a catechism in '*The Dumfries No. 4 Manuscript*', dated around 1710:

Question. *How were you brought in?* **Answer:** *Shamefully with a rope about my neck.*
Question. *Why a rope about your neck?* **Answer:** *To hang me if I should betray my trust'.*

However, it is more probable that the cable-tow was used to lead the Candidate, in a symbolic state of bondage, through part of the ceremony. Everything points to the wearing of the cable-tow as being an indication of the Candidate's submission to the will of the Master and the Lodge. Indeed, in a Ritual published in the early 1800s, the Candidate refers to the cable-tow as '*this humbling power*'. It could also have been used to withdraw a candidate from a Lodge, should he be unwilling to, or be deemed unworthy to, advance.

The noose is first described as a cable-tow in a printed Ritual in 1760. It may be thought that wearing it is at variance with the fundamental requirement that the Candidate must be a free man. Although in this case, the noose only signifies bondage to a state of ignorance, perhaps the Irish Ritual offers an explanation, as the Candidate only wears the cable-tow until he is about to take the obligation, when it is removed and thrown contemptuously onto the floor behind him, with the Conductor informing him that: *'naught but a free man may be made a Freemason'*.

The expression *'the length of my cable-tow'* is a modern allusion to one of the oldest of the Operative Masons' regulations, obliging them to attend annual or triennial assemblies, except if they were sick or dying. Later versions of the Old Charges often mentioned the distance within which attendance was obligatory, varying between three and fifty miles. Nowadays, the Candidate's obligation to answer any Lodge Summons *'if within the length of my cable-tow'* is his commitment to attend Lodge meetings, so long as it is in his power to do so, and no specific distance is mentioned or implied.

The reference to *'a cable's length from the shore'* is using 'cable' in its maritime meaning as a unit of measurement equivalent to 100 fathoms (600 feet). Several examples of the use of this term can be found, the earliest dating from 1555. It can be assumed that the distance from the shore was specified in the Ritual, to ensure that what was buried there would not be found.

In freemasonry, the cable-tow appears to be an outward and visible symbol relating to the obligation that the candidate has entered into, in which he agrees to go to the aid of a Brother *'within the length of my cable-tow'*, which simply means, if it is within his power to do so.

The cable-tow is not unlike, and can be interpreted as representing, the umbilical cord which links a baby to its mother at birth. Just as the umbilical cord is cut and replaced by a tie of love and obligation between mother and child, so the moment it is removed in the initiation ceremony is one of the most impressive in our Ritual because the new Brother, by his obligation, is now bound to the Lodge and his Brethren by a tie stronger than any rope. Fear is replaced by love and outer authority by inner obligation; the basis of brotherhood!

We must also remember that the cable-tow has two ends. If it binds a Mason to the Fraternity, by the same token it binds the Fraternity to the Mason, implying that the Fraternity is under vows to its members to guide and instruct them for the effective service of the Craft and of humanity. Control, obedience, and guidance are three meanings of the cable-tow as interpreted by the Craft.

For each Mason, *'the length of my cable-tow'* reaches as far as his moral principles go and his material conditions will allow. Of that distance, each of us must be his own judge, and, indeed, each should pass judgment upon himself accordingly, by his own acts in aid of others.

This presentation raises interesting points regarding an individual's commitment to Freemasonry, to his Lodge and to his fellow Brethren. This commitment can be interpreted in a practical way: -

- To Freemasonry by personifying the principles of the Craft in his daily life and by promoting it to others through his actions and directly to potential Candidates.
- To his Lodge by attending regularly, contributing in whatever way he can to the well-being of the Lodge through practical help, e.g. clearing away after a meeting and helping to organise social events.
- To his Brethren by being sensitive to the reasonable views and needs of them, by being ready to offer them assistance in time of need and to demonstrate charity by caring and understanding a brother's needs and human frailties.

Likewise, Freemasonry also has an obligation to guide, support and instruct individual Freemasons. It can do this in several ways: -

- through mentoring prospective Candidates, Candidates, new members and existing Brethren at key stages of their masonic journeys.
- through Lodges of Instruction, rehearsals and presentations
- through the Lodge Almoner when a Brother is ill or in need of help.
- through the Proposers and Seconders of Candidates
- through ensuring all Brethren always feel included and not isolated.
- through ensuring that someone sits with Entered Apprentices and Fellow Crafts in the Lodge and at Festive Boards who will ensure they are seated near individuals who are willing and able to engage with them and guide them.
- by involving as many Brethren as possible, especially junior members, in ceremonies and Ritual.

Masonic obedience does not mean that Freemasons are slavishly required to do as they are told without question. Rather, it means an acceptance of the hierarchy (e.g. Lodge, Province and Grand Lodge) and the Ritual and ceremonies. Our Masonic obligations bring with them a commitment to comply. But this most certainly does not mean that we cannot ask questions to understand why things are as they are. It is incumbent on senior Brethren and Lodge Officers to be open to questions, and it is incumbent on individual Freemasons to respect the guidance and answers they are given. At all times, we should strive to maintain harmony and show tolerance. It is perfectly acceptable to express our views but, if they are controversial or challenging, they should be couched in reasonable language.

The cable-tow can also symbolise the retention of Freemasons by their Lodges. There are a number of steps that can be taken when the cable-tow appears to be broken, or frayed: -

- Contact, listen and understand. Contact someone close to him, (e.g. his Proposer, Secunder or Mentor).
- Act on any information received.
 - If the problem is personal (e.g. domestic or work) offer appropriate, practical support.
 - If it is ill health, consider referral to the Almoner or offer transport to and from meetings.
 - Seek to reduce pressure and eliminate obstacles.
 - If learning Ritual is a problem, then involve the Lodge Mentor and Director of Ceremonies, or his assistant to help.
- Bear in mind that everyone concerned will have invested a great deal and try to ensure that this is not lost through lack of understanding or compassion.

##END##

Recommended use of Papers

Papers offer a simple, direct means of advancement in a particular aspect of Masonic knowledge. They can be used in a variety of ways:

- Read at home for private study
- Shared for pre-reading by members of a discussion group
- Read aloud in Lodge or Chapter, or in an LOI/COI/new members forum
 - Followed by 'any questions'
 - As a precursor to a discussion (*in which case much more time is needed, possibly more than double that allocated to the paper itself*)
 - Supported by audio-visual aids, if necessary.

They can be delivered by a single person or split into bite-sized pieces and read by multiple presenters (*in which case, the speaker(s) should have read and practiced the delivery of the paper beforehand*).

If the paper is to be used to introduce a discussion, the presenter will need to have thought about the material, done a little research, and prepared some open questions to engage with the audience. Kipling's dictum can be of help in preparing open questions, which should begin with one of his "serving men", as follows: *'I keep six honest serving men (they taught me all I knew). Their names are, What and Why and When and How and Where and Who'*.
Rudyard Kipling

If used as part of an event, the paper should be advertised and promoted by way of trailers, flyers and announcements, in summonses, letters, emails, notice boards, and on social media.

For further papers and other learning materials visit "Solomon" at <http://solomon.ugle.org.uk>

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