



Nugget

Without Scruple or Diffidence

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An exploration of the phrase ‘without scruple and without diffidence’.

Summary

The Second-Degree Tracing Board emphasizes the fact that masons entered ‘the Middle Chamber, without scruple and without diffidence’ - which phrase is unpacked and explored.

Keywords

Second-Degree, Middle-Chamber, Scruple, Diffidence

Without scruple or diffidence

We are told in the explanation of the Second-Degree Tracing Board that our ancient Brethren went into the Middle Chamber of King Solomon's Temple to receive their wages, which they did 'without scruple or diffidence, *'without scruple knowing they were justly entitled to them and without diffidence from the great reliance they placed on the integrity of their employers in those days'*. Why do we get these references to the payment of wages in this part of our ritual? One possible explanation is that it is an echo from the distant history of operative stone masonry when disputes over payment were maybe not uncommon.

We have to go back to the end of the 14th century when England, in common with the rest of Europe had been ravaged by the Black Death, and vast numbers of workers, both skilled and unskilled had died. This led to considerable labour shortages as the nation sought to gather itself together after the plague and to carry on with the tasks necessary for the survival of society. Not surprisingly, with labour shortages came inflationary pressures on wages and the King and his advisers in Parliament sought to combat these by the passage of laws attempting to hold wages at their pre-plague levels. It is thought by many masonic historians that this was one of the impulses which led to the emergence and growth of Masonic Guilds of skilled men. They could not only control entry into their trade by ensuring that only those who served a long and hard apprenticeship could practice their Craft; who could prove themselves by their knowledge of ritual words and ceremonies; but could also bargain their way round the laws which sought to keep wage levels down. Thus, the Guilds needed to maintain their control of the Craft and the supply of qualified labour and therefore sought to keep out 'Cowans and Intruders'; those who had not served a proper apprenticeship. and who did not possess the necessary skills of being able to dress and set stone in courses and who had no knowledge of working with mortar. That is why we still have references to entered apprentices 'kept'; being given a weekly allowance of corn, wine and oil (and no doubt other food and drink), whilst in training and not yet able to pursue their craft freely. The point being, if there were only a limited number of qualified workers then they could effectively bargain for their own rates of pay; it all sounds very contemporary!

It is tempting to see in our Second-Degree Ritual an echo of old Medieval practices and a survival of the days when the Masons' Guilds were not unlike Trades Unions seeking to advance their members' interests. But that cannot be the only justification for the wording of the ritual. It is important to see the moral subtext of the wording. The Craftsman, having proved his worth and knowledge by passing tests set by the Junior and Senior Wardens, ascends the Winding Staircase which is itself symbolic of self-improvement by the acquisition of knowledge and learning, and then enters the Middle Chamber knowing he is justly entitled to his reward. In other words, he has done his work honestly and justly, and is a true and virtuous Mason. Hence, he has no scruples about receiving his reward, but does so trusting in the integrity of his employers. That is to say, his fellow Members, who are thus required to act with honesty and fairness. In this sense every Mason is entitled to rely on decent and fair treatment from all his Brethren, and he must show them the same decency and respect. It is not just a matter of 'a fair day's pay for a fair day's work'. Rather it is a moral lesson underpinning the whole of the Craft, that every man who comes into it is entitled to respect, understanding, compassion, encouragement and help in his needs, but that conduct must be forthcoming from each to all and from all to each. Freemasonry is a mutual system of morality.

##END##

Recommended use of Nuggets

Nuggets offer a short, simple and readily absorbed means of progressing Masonic knowledge and an easy way to introduce learning to Lodges and Chapters. It is hoped that they will become a regular feature of Lodge and Chapter meetings as well as a source for private-study.

Nuggets can be included as an item in the summons and read at most Lodge/Chapter meetings. They can be:

- Read by either a new or an experienced Mason with the minimum of preparation and practice; *though ideally, they need to be read a few times beforehand.*
- Themed with the meeting or activity.
- Used to initiate a discussion within a Lodge/Chapter, LOI/COI, or group.
- Read at home and shared as a topic for a future discussion.
- Used as a focus for an unplanned, informal discussion.

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

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