



Paper

Only a Second?

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The hidden mysteries of the Second-Degree.

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Summary

An explanation of today's meaning of the 200 year-old rituals and symbols found in the Second-Degree Ritual.

Keywords

Second-Degree, Fellow-craft, Winding-Staircase, Tools, Nature & Science

Only a Second?

The Pillars, Stairs and the Middle Chamber

At first sight, the explanation of the Second-Degree Tracing Board might seem to have little of substance and much irrelevant detail: after all, who cares if there were 100 pomegranates in a row around the chapiters surmounting the pillars? However, as always, there is more to it.

The section about the pillars being hollow to hold the 'constitutional rolls' is probably masonic fiction, although hollow terracotta cylinders were often used to store valuable records in ancient times. The pillars could be said to represent ourselves, places for us to store our knowledge and actions. In as much as the Fellow Craft must pass between these pillars, denoting '*In strength*' and '*to establish*', in progressing from the world outside the Temple to the porchway, the stairs and the Middle Temple.

When Solomon's Temple was built, around 1,000 BC, they were most probably topped by dishes, which contained oil, which burned brightly at night and gave off clouds in the day. The idea that they were topped with '*Celestial and Terrestrial globes*' is modern masonic addition, given that in Solomon's time the earth was considered to be 'flat'. Similarly, the idea of our ancient brethren going into the Middle Chamber of the Temple to be paid their wages seems fantastic, given the number of Craftsmen working on the Temple. Imagine the scene: the work is about to start when the Craftsmen are informed that they will receive their wages in the middle chamber, up a winding staircase, but since neither the chamber nor the staircase existed at the time, where were they paid? Evidentially, although the legend of the winding staircase forms an important part of traditional Ancient Craft Masonry, the only allusion to it in the Bible is a single verse in the First Book of Kings: '*The door for 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*' (1 Kings 6:8), another case of a slender source being used to construct an elaborate allegory. The legend, as it is presented in the Second-Degree, is nothing more than a myth.

A straight staircase hides neither secret nor mystery, but a winding staircase requires courage to face the unknown. In the pictorial representation of the stairs on the Tracing Board, we cannot fully see where we are going, yet the stairs lead to the place where the wages of labour are to be received. The great Edwardian Masonic scholar, Walter Leslie Wilmshurst regarded the ascent of the winding staircase as the candidate '*leaving the outer world more and more behind him and rising into an inner, invisible world . . . the ascent of the mind to the source of light*'.

The Working Tools

The Second-Degree working tools are the square, the level and the plumb-rule. The Second-Degree is sometimes considered to be less important than the others, being squeezed between Initiation and Raising; yet this is to misunderstand it. The Second-Degree ceremony is indeed shorter than the others, but that is because a lot of its content was transferred to the Third-Degree ceremony when it was established in about 1725.

In learned societies and universities, a 'Fellow' is someone of high rank, and in operative masonry the term signified a mason who was qualified and able to do all the work. The Second-Degree working tools are of a higher level than those of the First-Degree as they are the structural tools used to build the whole edifice. Without the square and the level, the foundations could not be established and the floor could not be laid, and without the plumb-rule, nothing could be raised above the ground. The symbolic meaning of the tools likewise guides us to reflect on our conduct towards all our fellow human beings, not just our fellow Freemasons.

The shorter version of the Second-Degree working tools omits a lot of the reasoning behind the meaning. The long explanation includes the following phrases: *'the level demonstrates that we are all sprung from the same stock, partakers of the same nature and sharers of the same hope'* and *'the infallible Plumb-Rule, which, like Jacob's ladder, connects Heaven and Earth, and is the criterion of rectitude and truth. It teaches us to walk justly and uprightly before God and Man'*. Although these words are omitted from the shorter version, we find in both versions some of the best known phrases in Masonry today: *'thus the Square teaches Morality, the Level Equality and the Plumb-Rule, Justness and Uprightness of life and actions'*. We should always remember the tools we work with in this Degree: *'Thus by square conduct, level steps and upright intentions we hope to ascend to those immortal mansions whence all goodness emanates'*.

We are taught as masons to regard the Universe as one of the grandest of all symbols, revealing to men in all ages the ideas which are eternally revolving in the mind of God. Thus God and Geometry, the material and the spiritual, were constantly united in the thoughts of the operative masons: they laboured hard, not only to construct magnificent structures, but also to build a temple of divine thoughts. An old masonic writer once wrote that much of what has been written concerning the letter 'G' in Freemasonry is far more imaginative than useful! A wise view is that God and Geometry have much in common, so we may regard the 'G' as standing for each and both of them: 'God, the Grand Geometrician of the Universe'.

Nature & Science

'You are now permitted to extend your researches into the hidden mysteries of nature and science . . .'

What does this mean? Do we have to study Molecular Biology or Quantum Physics? Of course not!

Freemasonry, as an ancient and honourable institution, bears worthy comparison with Europe's venerable Gothic Cathedrals: both incorporate wisdom in their grand design and venerate consecrated space at their centre; both date from mediaeval times but have later architectural additions; mainly from the 18th and 19th centuries.

Both express Man's ambition on Earth to connect with heaven above; both, as the Holy Royal Arch ceremony tells us, *'have survived the wreck of mighty empires and the destroying hand of time'*. If a new cathedral were to be built today, it would probably reflect our times in its architecture and use of materials. At the same time, it would need to retain certain core symbols and remain faithful to the ethos which inspired earlier places of worship. If Freemasonry were to be recreated today, its use of form, ritual and language, the principal means by which its essence is inspired and purveyed, would also reflect our contemporary life. But great caution would need to be exercised to preserve the quintessence of its ancient symbols, so that the ethos at its heart would remain faithfully expressed and semantically preserved.

What words might we use from our current vernacular to encourage the Fellow-Craft to prepare himself for his raising to a Master Mason? How might we interpret today those 'hidden mysteries' and gain an understanding or knowledge of them?

We should not interpret 'hidden' as meaning 'obscure', but rather 'capable of being revealed to us by being properly prepared and in the right state of mind.' Today we interpret 'mystery' as meaning only a conundrum or an inexplicable event, but this was not what it meant when the ritual was first devised. Then it referred to a truth which is divinely revealed but is otherwise unknowable. For 'research', we should forget the science laboratory and think of diligence, perseverance and enquiry: *'knock and the door shall be opened.'* This has not only to do with admission to something, but also a release of creative potential contained within us. For 'science' we ought to think more of knowledge or the act of knowing and the exercise of consciousness, particularly in the development of our own nature and self-confidence; an understanding of the microcosm and its integral standing within the macrocosm. For 'intellectual faculty' we ought not only to understand rationality alone (our heads), but also creative imagination or intuitive intelligence, insight and awareness (our hearts). This shouldn't be a struggle, but something attained with ease and facility.

So the daunting challenge: *'You are now permitted to extend your researches into the hidden mysteries of nature and science'* can be interpreted as meaning *'to continue to make diligent enquiry into the deeper recesses of human nature and self-knowledge, both at the conscious and sub-conscious levels, until that which is unseen may become knowable and real'*.

The words of our ancient Craft's ritual have significance and relevance which are just as telling and meaningful today as they ever were. The words of our precious inheritance have been handed down to us intact and inviolate, and we should carefully preserve them as such.

The Letter 'G'

When the Second-Degree Tracing Board is explained, in the closing stages we hear the presenting Brother say: *'when our ancient Brethren were in the middle chamber of the Temple, their attention was peculiarly drawn to certain Hebrew characters which are here depicted by the letter 'G', denoting God, the Grand Geometrician of the Universe, to whom we must all submit and whom we ought humbly to adore.'* When the Lodge is closed in the Second Degree, we hear the following exchange:

Worshipful Master: *Brother Junior Warden, in this position what have you discovered?*

Junior Warden: *A sacred symbol.*

Worshipful Master: *Brother Senior Warden, where is it situated?*

Senior Warden: *In the Centre of the building.*

Worshipful Master: *To whom does it allude?*

Senior Warden: *The Grand Geometrician of the Universe.*

The letter 'G' is often seen in the centre of the Square and Compasses where Masonic objects are featured. In many English Lodge rooms, the 'G' is seen hanging in the centre of the ceiling and is also on every Second-Degree Tracing Board. It has been maintained that the letter 'G' should be one of the most prominent items on display in the Lodge room, and that it should therefore be readable from the West. It denotes Geometry, as revealed in a catechism printed in 1730:

Q. *Why were you made a Fellow Craft?*

A. *For the sake of the letter G.*

Q. *What does that G denote?*

A. *Geometry or the fifth science'.*

In some Lodges, the letter 'G' was given a definite Christian significance: the Grand Geometrician of the Universe. In the course of the 18th century there was much ritual writing, leading to great diversity between various masonic workings. In 1730, the letter 'G' was a symbol of a Fellow-Craft Lodge, and, so closely identified was the letter 'G' with the Fellow-Craft that we find him identified as *'a-letter-G-man'*. The letter 'G' is deservedly regarded as one of the most sacred masonic emblems. It conveys to the minds of the brethren the idea of God and Geometry, as it binds Heaven to Earth, the divine to the human.

##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.

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