



PAPER

Second Degree Commentary

Summary: A commentary on the points of interest in the ceremony of being passed to the Degree of a Fellow Craft Freemason. This is an extract from Revd. Neville Barker-Cryer's *What do you know about Ritual?* published by Lewis Masonic.

Guidance

This abbreviated presentation of the ceremony begins with the Tyler's knock on the door and the Inner Guard's report to the Worshipful Master and ends before an explanation of the Tracing Board. Its purpose is to give an explanation of what lies behind the various aspects of the Ceremony of Passing.

One: After the Tyler's words to the Inner Guard - 'Brother who has been regularly initiated into Freemasonry... for which ceremony he is properly prepared.'

Commentary

Before an Apprentice could become a Fellow or Master of the Craft in operative times, his progress was marked by his seven years of indentured service. He had several special tasks to complete and a standard he had to reach. Today we might well wonder what progress had indeed been made since this Apprentice was Initiated. What has he learnt of the Craft and begun to do other than memorise some answers to a few questions? Does he even understand these? Have we become too accustomed to automatic advancement? In many European Lodges a candidate for this Degree has to sit down and write out something of what he has learnt thus far in Freemasonry.



Two: Where the Inner Guard has reported to the Worshipful Master and after the Worshipful Master has asked, ‘... do you, Brother Inner Guard, vouch that he is in possession of the password?’

Commentary

Notice that to attain the privileges of the Second Degree we need God’s help since by our own unaided effort we will fail. This is a spiritual lesson that is easily overlooked but which pervades all English Masonry. Whilst the one implement presented to the candidate’s breast was meant to touch the conscience, here the Square reminds us of the need for the skill, both manual and mental, which a fully trained apprentice would be expected to be able to use. For us it will speak of the need to act ‘on the square’ with all mankind. About the Password more will be said shortly.

Three: When the candidate has risen after Prayer.

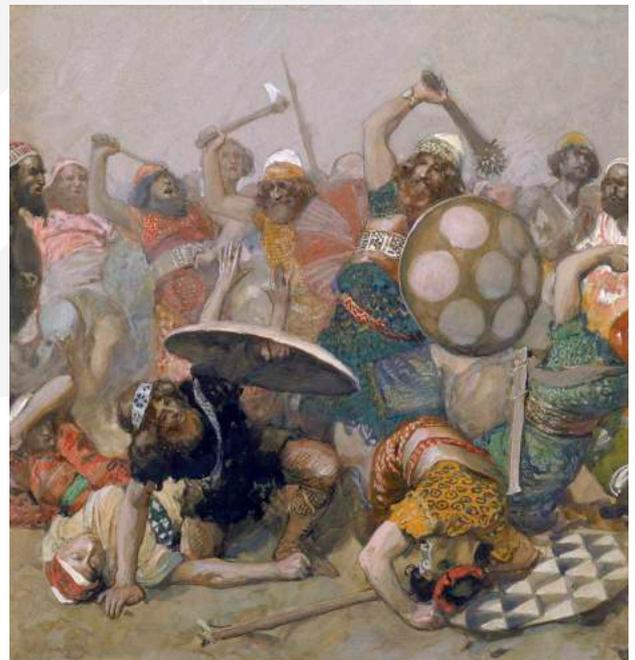
Commentary

Once the candidate has given the necessary proof of being a Mason the first activity in which he shares is prayer. Note that the emphasis is on the dependence, not only of the candidate but of all the Brethren, upon God’s aid in our work. That after all, what was said was true when we first came into a Lodge. Moreover, we are here reminded that the precepts we are to follow are not those of men but God’s. The emphasis on divine power and purposes in all our labours reflects the old Guild Masons’ banner that bore the words, ‘*In God is all our trust*’.

Four: Towards the end of the dialogue with the Junior Warden when the latter says: ‘Give me that word freely and at length’.

Commentary

In the Guild Masonry of the 17th century, as still in Irish working today, every individual Mason had to be questioned for passwords before a Lodge could be opened in a new Degree. This is reflected in what we have just seen take place. But there is more. Originally, in Modern’s Lodges, each of the Wardens sat in the West beside a pillar near the Lodge entrance, guarding the ‘gate’ of the Lodge. When the First and Second Degree ceremonies were created out of the old Fellow’s Degree one pillar was attached to each ceremony. When the Junior Warden says, ‘*Pass*’, he is really saying: you are permitted to pass my part of the Lodge gate. Soon the candidate will ‘*Pass J...n*’ and thus gain full access to a Lodge of Fellows, in operative times the only kind of Lodge there was.



Joshua Destroys the Giants, James Tissot - Public Domain

Five: After the dialogue with the Senior Warden when the latter has said: 'Pass Sh...th'.

Commentary

The password of this Degree is the one that is the best explained of the three that Craft Masons use. It may however, be of interest to know that when we learn the origin of these two words, that are alike yet different, it makes even more sense of what we are told. The word that the Hebrews used, 'Sh...th', meant, as it sounds, 'a flow of running water', whilst in Arabic the word 'Siblet' still means 'a grain of a cereal'. When these two words are used the failure of one group to aspirate is even better understood.

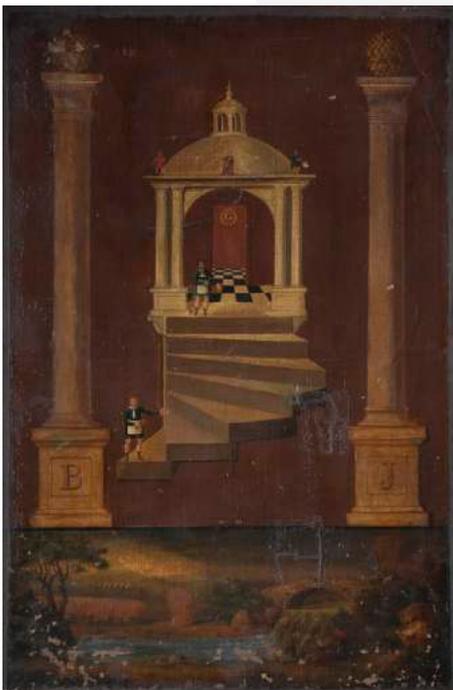


Six: When the Candidate having ascended the winding staircase comes to stand at the pedestal, before the Worshipful Master.

Commentary

The ascent of the winding staircase is a most distinctive feature of our English Second Degree. Its origin was as a means by which the priests could pass between the Holy Place and the three-tiered chambers that were attached to the Temple of Solomon on the North and South sides. Some Second Degree tracing boards correctly show the priests' access to this staircase through the south side wall half-way along the Holy Place. This meant that the priests then ascended from the North side of the next-door room and up the curved stairs to the East. That is why the steps we demonstrate move from North to East.

The fifteen or more steps derive from the early Christian tale that Mary, the mother of Jesus, ascended a staircase of fifteen steps to enter the Temple court of the men and was welcomed by a High Priest at the top. One of the Guild Plays performed by some medieval Masons portrayed just this event.



*Second Degree Tracing Board by Josiah Bowring
©Museum of Freemasonry*

Seven: When the candidate is kneeling at the Pedestal and just before the Worshipful Master begins the Obligation.

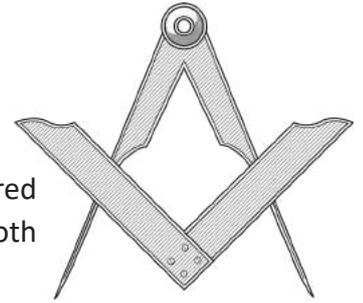
Commentary

When you remember that originally there was but one grade of Mason in a Lodge, that of Fellow or Master of the Craft, you will realise why in our present Second Degree we lay bare the other arm and foot from that which were referred to in the former Degree. In ancient Masonry the candidate was attired as he now is in the Third Degree. If non-Masons seem puzzled about our dress they forget that working Masons roll up their sleeves to work and once had pants that only came to the knee. Stockings were for special days, if affordable. The importance of the square is emphasised as he has his left arm resting in the angle of that implement. In the signs of the Degree we see that the same implement is suggested.

Eight: When the Brother has taken and sealed his obligation.

Commentary

The obligation in this Degree is similar to and yet shorter than that in the Entered Apprentice Degree. This is because originally there was only one obligation for both grades. The same applies to the Charge as we shall see.



The position of the square and compasses is not only a sign of progress but was originally the only way the two implements were displayed, that is, intertwined. Take a look at the symbols on the name boards of Past Masters in older Lodges and you will note that they show this sign and not that of a Master Mason. This is because the working Lodges of operative Masons were all made up of Fellows and from them the Wardens who ruled the Lodges were chosen. That is why the boards bear what we call the Fellow Craft symbol.

Nine: During the passage in which the grip, token and word are given to the newly passed Brother and immediately after the words *'improperly disclose the Secrets entrusted to him'*.

Commentary

As we discovered in the Entered Apprentice Degree, the secrets are only able to be conveyed when the recipient is standing with a regular step. This is exactly the same in form as in the First Degree save that now we have to take two steps before we can be enlightened, thus representing progress in accepted Freemasonry.

The first part of the sign is surely clear but the second needs some explanation. Because we take it with one hand already in place on the left breast we do not appreciate that the Haling Sign here, based on a couple of biblical passages, should really be given by lifting up both hands to the sky as a sign of supplication. Indeed, there are some workings of our ritual in which the first part is made, then discharged, and both hands are lifted before the third part is given.

The biblical passage usually referred to is that in which Joshua prayed for the light of day to continue, but there was also another passage in which, while Joshua fought and had his hands full with the battle, Moses prayed for him on a hill nearby and as his arms were weak Aaron and Hur supported them in a raised position so that the Lord might hear his prayer.

Ten: At the close of the Worshipful Master's instruction when he says, *'Pass J...n'*.

Commentary

The lettering or halving of a 'secret' word was a common practice in the 18th century or before. It is worth remarking that in some Masonic rituals, especially in the USA, the letters are not given in the order we use but haphazardly. That really can puzzle the candidate, never mind a Cowan.

The place of the two pillars is often questioned. There should really be no difficulty as the pillars are described as if looking east. In Solomon's Temple that meant looking out of the building, whilst with us it means looking in. Facing East, B... is on the left and J... on the right.

The status of J... as Assistant High Priest is not found in the Volume of the Sacred Law, instead it is recorded in other books of ancient usage (that are called the Pseudepigrapha).

Eleven: At the end of the interrogation by the Senior Warden as he says, 'Pass J...'

Commentary

We thought earlier about the meaning of the Words 'Pass B...' and now we come to the other half of this admission procedure. That the pillars B... and J... once belonged to one ceremony is made clear by the floor-cloths or early tracing boards which show the pillars together.

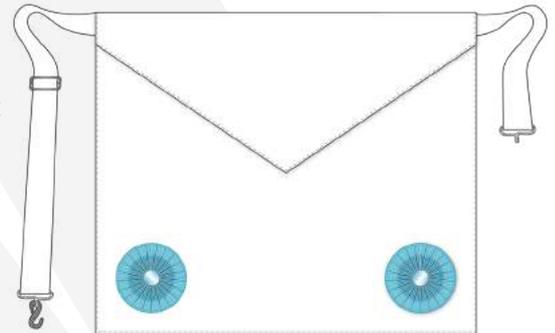
We know, for example, that in the Grand Lodge of All England at York it was customary up to 1780 to make men Apprentices and Fellows on the same evening. A trace of this practice is still evident in what we have just heard, for the Senior Warden asks, 'And what when conjoined with that in the former degree?'. Clearly the two terms only really make sense when they come together. That is how they were first meant to be. The conjoint meaning is an embellished translation of 1 Kings 8:13.

Twelve: After the Senior Warden has invested the new Fellow Craft with his apron and handed him back to the Senior Deacon.

Commentary

Have you ever asked yourself why the Worshipful Master cannot open the Lodge without going through the Junior Warden or close the Lodge himself? Why does he here let the Senior Warden have the privilege of putting the apron on the new Fellow Craft? It is because we are here reverting to the tradition of operative masonry in which a Warden, not a Master Mason, ruled the stonemasons' lodge. In Guild Masonry, in imitation of the way a Guild was ruled, the new idea of having a Right Worshipful Master crept in but the ancient rights of the office of Warden were still preserved.

In earlier times the way to distinguish a Fellow from an Apprentice was to turn down the flap of the white apron and turn up one corner so that it could hold a square. Now we have rosettes which are just the decorated forms of what were old buttonholes.

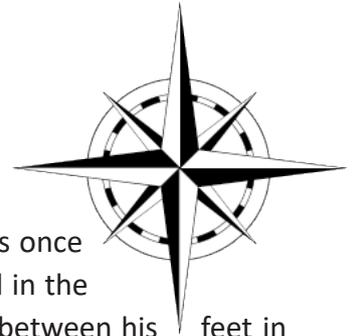


Thirteen: At the end of the Worshipful Master's remarks on the apron and after saying: '... the wonderful works of the Almighty.'

Commentary

If you wonder why a Craftsman is expected to make the Liberal Arts and Sciences his future study, then you need to know that as it was from the Craftsmen that the exclusive group known as Master Masons were selected. So to attain that rank you had to be proficient in understanding those seven subjects. For example, you had to know about the stars so as to be able to lay out a site, or to know about musical harmony in order to erect buildings useful for speakers and choirs.

The connection of the Seven Liberal Arts and Sciences with the winding staircase is brought to our attention in the explanation of the Tracing Board. What is interesting is that here we see the natural link between what working stonemasons had to know and what naturally interested the early Free and Accepted Masons.



Fourteen: At the close of the Charge at the South-East corner.

Commentary

This charge, like the obligation, is quite short because it is a second part of what was once a single Apprentice and Fellow whole. The reason why the new Fellow Craft is placed in the South-East corner is to mark his progress from a rough ashlar that was meant to be between his feet in the North-East, to the smooth ashlar that should be placed here, as it is in many Lodges.

The invitation *'to extend your researches into the hidden mysteries of Nature and Science'* echoes the study of the Seven Liberal Arts and Sciences just mentioned with *'the wonderful works of the Almighty'*. The symbolic connection of such labour with a true winding staircase is here very striking. If it is a stairway, as in a lighthouse or castle turret, then we cannot see what 'mystery' might be revealed round the next step.

Fifteen: When the Worshipful Master, after the presentation of the tools, says, *'to restore yourself to your personal comforts'*.

Commentary

The tools presented in this Degree are those of a working stonemason and those which still adorn the seats of the Worshipful Master and his Wardens. It is because we are now Free and Accepted Masons that we do what no working mason would do; we *'apply these tools to our morals'*. For a proper understanding of these tools in this sense we need to be aware that there is a longer explanation of them which teaches us important lessons, not least about our duty to God.

However, we should note that, as we have been instructed earlier, even the shorter form of this presentation concludes with the words, *'we hope to ascend to those immortal mansions whence all goodness emanates'*. We are not going to hear about the Tracing Board today, but that also reminds us of God's presence. As the seal of our United Grand Lodge declares, it is not just holiness that is required of us but *'Holiness to the Lord'*



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

*Note: All biblical passages are taken from the Authorized King James version and any reference to ritual will be from Emulation unless otherwise specified.

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Acknowledgement:

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