THE LEGEND OF THE WINDING STAIRS

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This piece was originally written by Albert G. Mackey, M.D. for the July 1859 volume of *American Freemasons New Monthly Magazine* which he edited. It was later included in his *The Symbolism of Freemasonry: Illustrating and Explaining Its Science and Philosophy, its Legends, Myths and Symbols*, published in 1869. Albert Gallatin Mackey was an American medical doctor and one of the most influential Nineteenth Century authors on Freemasonry. His *Encyclopedia of Freemasonry*, his *The History of Freemasonry: Its Legends and Traditions* and his *The Principles of Masonic Law* are landmark works and should be considered for every Mason's library.

Although the legend of the Winding Stairs forms an important tradition of Ancient Craft Masonry, the only allusion to it in scripture is to be found in a single verse in the 6th chapter of the 1st Book of Kings, and is in these words: "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." Out of this slender material has been constructed an allegory, which, if properly considered in its symbolical relations, will be found to be of surpassing beauty. But it is only as a symbol that we can regard this whole tradition; for the historical facts and the architectural details alike forbid us for a moment to suppose that the legend, as it is rehearsed in the second degree of Masonry, is anything more than a magnificent philosophical myth.

Let us inquire into the true design of this legend, and learn the lesson of symbolism which it is intended to teach.

In the investigation of the true meaning of every Masonic symbol and allegory, we must be governed by the single principle that the whole design of Freemasonry as a speculative science is the investigation of Divine truth. To this great object everything is subsidiary. The Mason is, from the moment of his initiation as an Entered Apprentice to the time at which he receives the full fruition of Masonic light, an investigator—a laborer in the quarry and the Temple—whose reward is to be truth. All

the ceremonies and traditions of the Order tend to this ultimate design. Is there light to be asked for? It is the intellectual light of wisdom and truth. Is there a word to be sought? That word is the symbol of truth. Is there a loss of something that had been promised? That loss is typical of the failure of man, in the infirmity of his nature, to discover Divine truth. Is there a substitute to be appointed for that loss? It is an allegory which teaches us that in this world man can approximate only to the full conception of truth.

Hence there is in Speculative Masonry always a progress, symbolized by its peculiar ceremonies of initiation. There is an advancement from a lower to a higher state—from darkness to light— from death to life—from error to truth. The candidate is always ascending; he is never stationary; never goes back, but each step he takes brings him to some new mental illumination—to the knowledge of some more elevated doctrine. The teaching of the Divine Master is, in respect to this continual progress, the teaching of Masonry – "No man having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of heaven." And similar to this is the precept of Pythagoras: "When traveling, turn not back, for if you do, the furies will accompany you."

Now, this principle of Masonic symbolism is apparent in many places in each of the degrees. In that of the Entered Apprentice we find it developed in the theological ladder, which resting on earth, leans its top upon heaven, thus inculcating the idea of an ascent from a lower to a higher sphere, as the objects of Masonic labor. . . In all the degrees we find it presented in the ceremony of circumambulation, in which there is a gradual examination by, and a passage from, an inferior to a superior officer. And lastly, the same symbolic idea is conveyed in the Fellow Craft's degree in the legend of the Winding Stairs. In an investigation of the symbolism of the Winding Stairs we will be directed to the true explanation by a reference to their origin, their number, the objects which they recall, and their termination, but above all by a consideration of the great object which an ascent upon them was intended to accomplish.

The steps of this Winding Staircase commenced, we are informed, at the porch of the Temple, that is to say, at its very entrance. But nothing is more undoubted in the science of Masonic symbolism than that the Temple was the representative of the world purified by the Shekinah, or the Divine Presence. The world of the profane is without the Temple; the world of the initiated is within its sacred walls. Hence to enter the Temple, to pass within the porch, to be made a Mason, and to be born into the

world of Masonic light, are all synonymous and convertible terms. Here, then, the symbolism of the Winding Stairs begins.

The Apprentice, having entered within the porch of the Temple, has begun his Masonic life. But the first degree in Masonry, like the lesser mysteries of the ancient systems of initiation, is only a preparation and purification for something higher. The Entered Apprentice is the child in Masonry. The lessons which he receives are simply intended to cleanse the heart and prepare the recipient for that mental illumination which is to be given in the succeeding degrees.

As a Fellow Craft, he has advanced another step, and as the degree is emblematic of youth, so it is here that the intellectual education of the candidate begins. And therefore, here, at the very spot which separates the Porch from the Sanctuary, where childhood ends and manhood begins, he finds stretching out before him a winding stair which invites him, as it were, to ascend, and which, as the symbol of discipline and instruction, teaches him that here must commence his Masonic labor—here he must enter upon those glorious though difficult researches, the end of which is to be the possession of Divine truth. The Winding Stairs begin after the candidate has passed within the Porch, and between the Pillars of Strength and Establishment, as a significant symbol to teach him that as soon as he had passed beyond the years of irrational childhood, and commenced his entrance upon manly life, the laborious task of self-improvement is the first duty that is placed before him. He cannot stand still, if he would be worthy of his vocation; his destiny as an immortal being requires him to ascend, step by step, until he has reached the summit, where the treasures of knowledge await him.

The number of these steps in all the systems has been odd. Vitruvius remarks, and the coincidence is at least curious, that the ancient temples were always ascended by an odd number of steps, and he assigns as the reason, that commencing with the right foot at the bottom, the worshiper would find the same foot foremost when he entered the Temple, which was considered as a fortunate omen. But the fact is that the symbol of numbers was borrowed by the Masons from Pythagoras, in whose system of philosophy it plays an important part, and in which odd numbers were considered as more perfect than even ones. Hence, throughout the Masonic system we find a predominance of odd numbers; and, while three, five, seven, nine, fifteen, and twenty-seven, are all important symbols, we seldom find a reference to two, four, six, eight, or ten. The odd number of the stairs was therefore intended to symbolize

the idea of perfection, to which it was the object of the aspirant to attain.

As to the particular number of the stairs, this has varied at different periods. Tracing-boards of [18th century] . . . have been found, in which only five steps are delineated, and others in which they amount to seven. The Prestonian lectures used in England, in the beginning of . . . [the 19th] this century, gave the whole number as thirty-eight, dividing them into series of one, three, five, seven, nine, and eleven. The error of making an even number, which was a violation of the Pythagorean principle of odd numbers as the symbol of perfection, was corrected in the Hemming lectures, adopted at the union of the two Grand Lodges of England [in 1813], by striking out the eleven, which was also objectionable as receiving a sectarian explanation. In this country the number was still further reduced to fifteen, divided into three series of three, five, and seven. We shall adopt this American division as the basis of our explanations, although, after all, the particular number of the steps, or the peculiar method of their division into series, will not in any way affect the general symbolism of the whole legend.

The candidate, then, in the second degree of Masonry, represents a man starting forth on the journey of life, with the great task before him of self-improvement. For the faithful performance of this task, a reward is promised, which reward consists in the development of all his intellectual faculties, the moral and spiritual elevation of his character, and the acquisition of truth and knowledge. Now, the attainment of this moral and intellectual condition supposes an elevation of character, an ascent from a lower to a higher life, and a passage of toil and difficulty, through rudimentary instruction, to the full fruition of wisdom. This is, therefore, beautifully symbolized by the Winding Stairs; at whose foot the aspirant stands ready to climb the toilsome steep, while at its top is placed "that hieroglyphic bright which none but Craftsmen ever saw," as the emblem of Divine truth. And, hence, a distinguished writer has said that "these steps, like all the Masonic symbols, are illustrative of discipline and doctrine, as well as of natural, mathematical, and metaphysical science, and open to us an extensive range of moral and speculative inquiry."

The candidate, incited by the love of virtue and the desire of knowledge, and withal, eager for the reward of truth which is set before him, begins at once the toilsome ascent. At each division, he pauses to gather instruction from the symbolism which these divisions present to his attention.

At the first pause which he makes he is instructed in the peculiar organization of the Order of which he has become a disciple. But the information here given, if taken in its naked, literal sense, is barren and unworthy of his labor. The rank of the officers who govern, and the names of the degrees which constitute the institution, can give him no knowledge which he has not before possessed. We must look, therefore, to the symbolic meaning of these allusions for any value which may be attached to this part of the ceremony.

The reference to the organization of the Masonic institution is intended to remind the aspirant of the union of men in society, and the development of the social state out of the state of nature. He is thus reminded, in the very outset of his journey, of the blessings which arise from civilization, and of the fruits of virtue and knowledge which are derived from that condition. Masonry itself is the result of civilization; while in grateful return it has been one of the most important means of extending that condition of mankind.

All the monuments of antiquity, that the ravages of time have left, combine to prove that man had no sooner emerged from the savage into the social state than he commenced the organization of religious mysteries, and the separation, by a sort of divine instinct, of the sacred from the profane. Then came the invention of architecture as a means of providing convenient dwellings and necessary shelter from the inclemencies and vicissitudes of the seasons, with all the mechanical arts connected with it, and lastly, geometry, as a necessary science to enable the cultivators of land to measure and designate the limits of their possessions. All these are claimed as peculiar characteristics of speculative Masonry, which may be considered as the type of civilization, the former bearing the same relation to the profane world as the latter does to the savage state. Hence, we at once see the fitness of the symbolism which commences the aspirant's upward progress in the cultivation of knowledge and the search after truth, by recalling to his mind the condition of civilization and the social union of mankind as necessary preparations for the attainment of these objects. In the allusions to the officers of a Lodge, and the degrees of Masonry as explanatory of the organization of our own society, we clothe in our symbolic language the history of the organization of society.

Advancing in his progress, the candidate is invited to contemplate another series of instructions. The human senses, as the appropriate channels through which we receive all our ideas of perception, and which, therefore, constitute the most

important sources of our knowledge, are here referred to as a symbol of intellectual cultivation. Architecture, as the most important of the arts which conduce to the comfort of mankind, is also alluded to here, not simply because it is so closely connected with the operative institution of Masonry, but also, as the type of all the other useful arts. In his second pause, in the ascent of the Winding Stairs, the aspirant is, therefore, reminded of the necessity of cultivating practical knowledge.

So far, then, the instructions he has received relate to his own condition in society as a member of the great social compact and to his means of becoming, by a knowledge of the arts of practical life, a necessary and useful member of that society.

But his motto will be "Excelsior." Still must he go onward and forward. The stair is still before him; its summit is not yet reached, and still further treasures of wisdom are to be sought for, or the reward will not be gained, nor the middle chamber, the abiding place of truth, be reached.

In his third pause, he, therefore, arrives at that point in which the whole circle of human science is to be explained. Symbols, we know, are in themselves arbitrary and of conventional signification, and the complete circle of human science might have been as well symbolized by any other sign or series of doctrines as by the seven liberal arts and sciences. But Masonry is an institution of the olden time; and this selection of the liberal arts and sciences as a symbol of the completion of human learning is one of the most pregnant evidences that we have of its antiquity.

In the seventh century, and for a long time afterward, the circle of instruction to which all the learning of the most eminent schools and most distinguished philosophers was confined, was limited to what was then called the liberal arts and sciences, and consisted of two branches, the trivium and the quadrivium. The trivium includes grammar, rhetoric, and logic; the quadrivium comprehended arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy.

These seven heads were supposed to include universal knowledge. He who was master of these was thought to have no need of a preceptor to explain any books or to solve any questions which lay within the compass of human reason; the knowledge of the trivium having furnished him with the key to all language, and that of the quadrivium having opened to him the secret laws of nature.

At a period when few were instructed in the trivium, and very few studied the quadrivium, to be master of both was sufficient to complete the character of a philosopher. The propriety, therefore, of adopting the seven liberal arts and sciences as a symbol of the completion of human learning is apparent. The candidate having reached this point is now supposed to have accomplished the task upon which he had entered—he has reached the last step, and is now ready to receive the full fruition of human learning.

So far, then, we are able to comprehend the true symbolism of the Winding Stairs. They represent the progress of an inquiring mind with the toils and labors of intellectual cultivation and study, and the preparatory acquisition of all human science, as a preliminary step to the attainment of divine truth, which it must be remembered is always symbolized in Masonry by the Word.

Here we may again allude to the symbolism of numbers, which is for the first time presented to the consideration of the Masonic student in the legend of the Winding Stairs. The theory of numbers as the symbols of certain qualities was originally borrowed by the Masons from the school of Pythagoras. We do not expect, however, to develop this doctrine, in its entire extent, on the present occasion, for the numeral symbolism of Masonry would itself constitute materials for an ample essay. It will be sufficient to advert to the fact that the total number of the steps, amounting in all to fifteen, in the American system, is a significant symbol. For fifteen was a sacred number among the Orientals, because the letters of the holy name JAH, יה, were, in their numerical value, equivalent to fifteen; and hence a figure, in which the nine digits were so disposed as to make fifteen either way when added together perpendicularly, horizontally, or diagonally, constituted one of their most sacred talismans. The fifteen steps in the Winding Stairs are therefore symbolic of the name of God.

But we are not yet done. It will be remembered that a reward was promised for all this toilsome ascent of the Winding Stairs. Now what are the wages of a Speculative Mason? Not money, nor coin, nor wine, nor oil. All these are but symbols. His wages are Truth, or that approximation to it which will be most appropriate to the degree into which he has been initiated. It is one of the most beautiful, but at the same time most abstruse, doctrines of the science of Masonic symbolism, that the Mason is ever to be in search of truth, but is never to find it. This divine truth, the object of all his labors, is symbolized by the Word, for which we all know he can only obtain a

substitute; and this is intended to teach the humiliating but necessary lesson that the knowledge of the nature of God and of man's relation to him, which knowledge constitutes divine truth, can never be acquired in this life. It is only when the portals of the grave open to us, and give us an entrance into a more perfect life, that this knowledge is to be attained. "Happy is the man," says the father of lyric poetry, "who descends beneath the hollow earth, having beheld these mysteries; he knows the end, he knows the origin of life."

The Middle Chamber is therefore symbolic of this life, where only the symbol of the word can be given, where only the truth is to be reached by approximation, and yet where we are to learn that truth will consist in a perfect knowledge of the G. A. O. T. U. This is the reward of the inquiring Mason; in this consists the wages of a Fellow Craft; he is directed to the truth, but must travel further and ascend still higher to attain it.

It is then, as a symbol, and a symbol only, that we must study this beautiful legend of the Winding Stairs. If we attempt to adopt it as an historical fact, the absurdity of its details stares us in the face, and wise men will wonder at our credulity. Its inventors had no desire thus to impose upon our folly; but offering it to us as a great philosophical myth, they did not for a moment suppose that we would pass over its sublime moral teachings to accept the allegory as an historical narrative, without meaning, and wholly irreconcilable with records of scripture, and opposed by all the principles of probability. To suppose that eighty thousand craftsmen were weekly paid in the narrow precincts of the Temple chambers, is simply to suppose an absurdity. But to believe that all this pictorial representation of an ascent by a Winding Stairs to the place where the wages of labor were to be received, was an allegory to teach us the ascent of the mind from ignorance, through all the toils of study and the difficulties of obtaining knowledge, receiving here a little and there a little, adding something to the stock of our ideas at each step, until, in the middle chamber of life—in the full fruition of manhood—the reward is attained, and the purified and elevated intellect is invested with the reward, in the direction how to seek God and God's truth—to believe this is to believe and to know the true design of Speculative Masonry, the only design which makes it worthy of a good or a wise man's study.

Its historical details are barren, but its symbols and allegories are fertile with instruction.

And so we close with this theory: The Fellow Craft represents a man laboring in the pursuit of truth; and the Winding Stairs are the devious pathways of that pursuit.