

LESSER LIGHTS

When an initiate is first brought to light in a Masonic lodge, the radiance comes from the three lesser lights, which form a triangle about the altar. It seems, at first, rather odd that so great and important a symbol should receive such scant attention in the ritualistic body of Freemasonry. We are instructed that they are called lesser lights. that they are placed in a triangle, that by their light we may see other objects, that they represent the Sun and Moon and Worshipful Master, for certain reasons which are rather briefly explained, and that is all.

Later on we learn, more by example than by precept, more by custom than by law, that lesser lights are always lit when a lodge is opened. Even when their flames do not really burn, they are constructively burning. They are supposed to be lighted as soon as the lodge is opened and the altar arranged; to be extinguished when the lodge is closed and the great lights displaced. But nowhere in our ritual are we told much of anything as to why all these things are so; how the lesser lights came to be; what their hidden, covered, secret, symbolic meaning is.

And you shall search through many a Masonic volume and tome and find no more light on the lesser lights than the ritual gives. Mackey is unusually brief, and beyond drawing a parallel to the use of the seven branched candelabra as described in the great light, and stating that their use in Masonry is very old, they appearing in print in reference to Masonry in the seventeenth century, adds practically nothing to the ritual explanations.

And yet it could not be possible that so important a symbol could have no more soul than is given in the few words we devote to it. It seems obvious that it is one of the symbols in Freemasonry, of which there are so many, which the individual brother is supposed to examine and translate for himself, getting from it what he can, and enjoying what he gets in direct proportion to the amount of labour and thought he is willing to devote to the process of extracting the meaning from the outer covering.

Let us dig a bit together; labour in company is lightened always; a burden shared is a burden halved. Immediately after the lesser lights are named, our attention is directed to the fact that they are in a triangle about the altar. In some jurisdictions they are closely about the altar; in others, one is placed at each of the stations of the three principal officers. In some lodges the three lesser lights form a right angle, in others an equilateral; in others an isosceles triangle. What is uniform throughout the Masonic world is the triangular formation about the altar; what is different is the size and shape of the triangle. Of course, it is not possible to place three lights to form anything else but a triangle; they cannot be made to form a square or a star. Which brings us to the first place in which to sink our Masonic shovel; why are there three lesser lights and not two or four or more?

There are a number of reasons. Any thinking brother has already discovered that three occurs throughout the whole system of the Ancient Craft Masonry; three degrees, three steps, three ancient Grand Masters, and so on. It will be no surprise to recall that three is the first of the great Sacred Numbers of the Ancient Mysteries, and that it is the numerical symbol of God. Not, if you please, because God was necessarily considered as triune. While many religions of many ages and peoples have conceived of Divinity as a trinity, the figure three as a symbol of God is far older than any Trinitarian doctrine. It comes from the triangle, which is the first possible figure made up of straight lines, which is without beginning or ending. One line, or two lines, have ends. They start and finish. The triangle, like the square or the five or more sided figure, has no loose ends. And the triangle is the first of these which can be made; as God was always considered as First, and also as without either beginning or ending, the triangle itself soon became a symbol of Deity.

Sun worship was among the first of religions; let him who knows lay down the facts as to whether sun worship preceded fire worship or fire worship that of the sun. To us it does not matter. Sun worship is far, far older than any recorded history; it goes back, into the first dim mists which obscure the very first beginnings of intelligence. So it was only natural that the early worshippers should set a light beside their altar or holy place and name it for the sun.

Ancient peoples made much of sex. Their two greatest impulses were self-preservation and mating. Their third was protection of children. So enormously powerful were these impulses in primal man, that not all his civilization, his luxury, his complicated and involved life, have succeeded in removing these as the principal mainsprings of all human endeavour. It was natural for the savage worshipper of a shining god in the sky to think he, too, requires a mate; especially when that mate was so plainly in evidence; the moon became the sun's bride by a process of reasoning as plain as it was childlike.

Father, mother. There must be a child, of course. And that child was Mercury, the nearest planet to the sun, the one god kept closest to him. Here we have the origin of the three lesser lights; in earliest recorded accounts of the Mysteries of Eleusis we find three lights about the holy place, representing the Sun, the Moon and Mercury.

Albert Pike says: 'They are still the three lights of a Masonic lodge, except that for Mercury, the Master of the lodge has been absurdly substituted'. Albert Pike was a very great and very learned man. To him Freemasonry owes a debt greater, perhaps than to any other who ever lived; he gave her study, he brought forth her poetry, he interpreted her symbols, he defines her truths, he made plain much that she had concealed. But Pike himself defended the right of all Masons to study and interpret the symbols of Freemasonry for themselves. So that it is with no thought of controversy with the immortal dead that many contend that there is no absurdity in Freemasonry taking the ancient lights which symbolize Sun and Moon and Mercury and making them stand for Sun and Moon and Worshipful Master of the lodge.

For sun and moon give light. While it is true that there is no real regularity with which the moon governs the night, since the night gets along just as well without the moon as with her, she does give light when she is present. There is no question that the sun governs and rules the day; without the sun there would be no day. The sun of course gives light and life as well.

The Worshipful Master rules and governs his lodge as truly as the sun and moon rule and govern day and night. There can be no lodge without a Worshipful Master; he is in a very real sense the lodge itself. There are some things he cannot do that the brethren, under him, can do. But without him the brethren can do nothing, while he, without the brethren's consent or even their assistance, can do much. It is one of the principal functions of the Worshipful Master to disseminate light, Masonic light, to his lodge. That the duty is often honoured by neglect as by performance has nothing to do with the fact that it is a duty.

So that the inclusion of a symbol of the Worshipful Master, as a giver of light, is to most of us neither fanciful nor absurd, but a logical carrying out of that Masonic doctrine which makes a Master the Giver of Light to his brethren.

The ritual instructs candidates that they behold the great lights of Masonry by the illumination of the lesser lights. This is an actual fact, but it is also a symbol. The great light cannot be read without light; the square and compasses cannot be used in the dark, neither can be understood; nor can we make use of them for the noble and glorious purpose taught us in the Speculative Masonry, without we receive symbolic light, Masonic light, from the East; that is, from the Worshipful Master or those he delegates to bring that 'good and wholesome instruction' which is at once his duty and his happiness.

A lesson is taught in the references to regularity of the heavenly luminaries, as guides for the government of a lodge by the Worshipful Master. The fact that the Moon is not regular in her attendance upon the Sun, or the night and that she does not, in any such sense as does the sun, govern the period of darkness in which she appears, in no way detracts from the forces of these admonitions. For these phrases are very old, and go back to a time when men knew much less of astronomy than they do today; to a time when the moon in popular belief, had much greater powers than she actually possesses. We know the moon to have almost no effect upon the earth, as far as our lives are concerned, save as she makes the tides.

Our ancient brethren believed her light to be full of weird and wonderful powers; 'moon-struck' and 'lunatic' (from Luna, the moon) are symbol words of these ancient and now exploded beliefs. Less than two hundred years ago, many crimes, misdemeanours, beneficent influences and beautiful actions were ascribed to the moon, things evil had to be done 'in the dark of the moon'; witches were supposed to ride in moon-light, dogs bayed at the moon because by its light they could see what was hidden from mortal eyes, sheeted ghosts preferred moonlight to starlight and incantations were never properly recited unless in the moonlight; the moon gave or withheld crops, influenced the weather and when eclipsed, foretold disaster. With such a body of belief, it is not surprising that the moon was considered, even by the educated, to have 'governing' powers, whence probably, her inclusion with such abilities into our ritual.

That we know better is in no sense antagonistic to our use of the old, old phrases in our ceremonies. We know better about many things. The knowledge of the art of architecture as set forth in the Middle Chamber lecture would get no one a job as office boy in a builders office today. Our penalties, never enforced by Masons are wholly symbolic. We have many other ways of transmitting intelligence today which are not included in a list of ways of writing and printing. But we love and repeat the old ritual because it is old; because it is a bond with those who have gone this way before us; because it is the time-tied and well trusted way of making Masons and we would not alter it. No, not for any modern phrases, no matter how deep in erudition they were steeped. So we continue to have our moon 'govern' the night, and do it 'regularly' too, finding in this bond with other men of other times something dear and precious, nonetheless that the words portray only a fancy.

Indeed the whole matter of the lesser lights is such a bond, and such a fancy. It would be far more accurate if we repeated 'The lesser lights represent the sun, the earth and the moon. As the sun in its gravity, causes the earth to revolve around it in three-hundred and sixty-five and a fraction days, and the moon revolves about the earth in approximately twenty-eight days, so the earth is never without government and light, as all lodges should be.' But would you like that sort of ritual?

It should be noted that it is by the light of the lesser lights that the Entered Apprentice is led to see those objects which mean so much to a Mason, the great lights. The inestimable gift of God to man for the rule and guide of his faith; the tools dedicated to the Craft and to the Master and the Alpha and Omega of Freemasonry. Light alone is not enough, light must be used. Here too, is symbolism which is well to muse upon. Light from the East, illumination from the Master, is not enough. It is merely a help by which we can see the truth and use it. As the illumination from the lesser lights gives us opportunity to see, examine, understand and live by the great principles of fraternity and brotherhood.

Perhaps it is because this is so that the Master is given the sun and moon as guides; an erratic Master, one whose light is not well governed, one whose illumination to his brethren is feeble and intermittent, does not make for a well-educated, well-instructed Craft. But the Master who takes the sun and moon for guides, whose light given to his brethren is brilliant and complete when they need it, soft and gentle when they are in the mood, who can be depended upon, whose conduct is in all ways 'regular', .he is a Master to be cherished and revered, for he is truly 'worshipful' in the best sense of the old word, a veritable seventh jewel in the lodge.

As the lodge as a whole is a symbol of the world, so should a man's heart be to him always a symbol of the lodge. In it he should carry ever what he may remember of the great light, and with spiritual compasses lay out his work; with spiritual square, square both work and actions toward all mankind, more especially a brother Mason. Therefore must he carry also in his heart three tiny Lesser Lights, by the light of which he uses his spiritual lodge furnishings. If he lights these from the torch of love and burns one for friendliness, one for helpfulness and one for godliness, he will be truly an Initiate in the real sense of that term and find when he stands in the physical temple, about the Altar of Free masonry, a new satisfaction in the new meaning which the three Lesser Lights or luminaries will, with a silent light and soft, imprint upon his heart.

An address by M.W. Bro. J. Hogg, P.G.M. of the Grand Lodge of British Columbia to the Victoria Lodge of Education and Research on April 15, 1980.