

FREEMASONRY: HOW, WHENCE & WHITHER?

FREEMASONRY made its first appearance as a Society, i.e. as a distinct organization, in the year 1717. Four Lodges then existing in London combined on St. John's Day of that year to form a Grand Lodge, "as a centre of concord and harmony", and within a very few years there had developed from this modest foundation an intellectual and spiritual movement of an extent that seems almost incredible.

The Grand Lodge of 1717 was certainly not the beginning of speculative Freemasonry, but nevertheless its inauguration clearly marks a re-beginning on a new foundation. When Masonic students learn today that the formation of the first Grand Lodge is accepted as the real starting-point of the history of the modern Order, they are inclined to take it for granted that there is nothing more likely to be beyond question than the circumstances under which Speculative Freemasonry originated. This view, however, is fallacious. To delve into so-called Masonic history is like trying to find one's way through a labyrinth, or, rather, through an innumerable succession of labyrinths; for although works on the subject are numerous, the theories propounded by some of the authors are frequently in direct contradiction to those of others. The reason for this is easily explained: the origin of Speculative Freemasonry is shrouded in mystery.

We know approximately what happened in 1717. We know what was then fundamentally decided, but we know nothing whatever of the men who assembled on that 24th day of June which has become so significant. Solely from the fact that the Founders of the first Grand Lodge were corporations or Lodges and not individuals, it is clear that something more or less in obscurity preceded the organization which made its fact public at the date in question.

But, in the course of more than two hundred years of research this "something" has never been properly determined.

The beginnings of Speculative Freemasonry are lost in obscurity, an obscurity that is all the greater because the Brethren of 1717 evidently made no attempt to throw even the faintest ray of light upon it. Quite the contrary is the case. The author of the first and fundamental Constitutions of 1723, Dr. James Anderson, who was also the first Masonic historian, has indeed bequeathed us an extensive history; but what he wrote can only be regarded as legend, dictated by the desire to make the newly created Society appear as venerable as possible. In the Book of Constitutions of 1723 Anderson made very few references to the events which took place in 1717 and the succeeding years. The only direct allusion occurs at the end of the historical portion, and is as follows:-

"And now the Freeborn British Nations, disentangled from foreign and civil Wars, and enjoying the good Fruits of Peace and Liberty, having of late much indulged their happy Genius for Masonry of every sort, and reviv'd the drooping Lodges of London, this fair Metropolis flourisheth, as well as other Parts, with several worthy particular Lodges, that have a quarterly Communication and an annual grand Assemble, wherein the Forms and Usages of the most ancient and worshipful Fraternity are wisely propagated, and the Royal Art duly cultivated, and the Cement of Brotherhood preserved; so that the whole Body resembles a well built Arch".

In the light of the foregoing it is quite in order to place on record that modern Speculative Freemasonry had a beginning in the early years of the eighteenth century, but this statement is only valid in the sense that in the year 1717 there originated that which afterwards developed into, and now subsists as, the English Masonic Constitution. Masonry itself, however, existed long before that time, and in two distinct forms:

(1)..EXOTERIC: In the Operative Building Guilds connected with the practical building trade.

(2)..ESOTERIC: In a variety of secret communities consisting of mystics and occultists, having no relation to the practical building trade, but using builder's terminology for symbolical purposes of their own.

The advent of modern Speculative Freemasonry proclaimed to the world that henceforth both these forms of Masonry were "cemented" in one "grand design", and their affinity for the purpose contemplated by the now organization was demonstrated in "a peculiar system of morality, veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols", when it became apparent that the Art and Craft of Masonry which was Operative in an old order of things had emerged Figurative in a new. How this transformation was effected, and under whose direction, are two problems which still remain to be solved to the satisfaction of the large majority of Masonic students. There seems little doubt, however, that in the Middle Ages there existed in this country a school of philosophical thought which practiced a form of the Ancient Mysteries suitable to those times and conditions. At the close of the 15th century a decision appears to have been come to by some of those far-seeing men to put forward the old mystical tradition in a simple form and to attempt to interest a small section of the public in it. Some of the members of this advanced school therefore became incorporated with surviving Lodges of the Guild and Fellowship of Operative Masonry, from whom we probably derive our First and Second Degrees, with their Operative symbols and moral instruction; thereby combining and preserving a form of the ancient moral dramas, of which our system is a mystical descendant and legitimate exponent. It is admitted that this suggestion is incapable of rigorous proof, and will not, perhaps, commend itself to the academic mind, but notwithstanding its rejection on these grounds, we find, about the year 1600 and onwards, the first small signs of a movement that has eventuated in the vast modern Masonic Craft.

The "Mary's Chapel" Lodge in Edinburgh preserves as its most valued treasure the oldest existing masonic minute book, the entries in which go back to the year 1598. As early as the "aucht day of Janij the zeir of 'God 1600 yeirs", the registration of the first non-operative - John Boswell, Laird of Auchinlook - took place. Operative Lodges were at that time becoming obsolete and defunct, and by 1620 we find that in London Operative Masonry had become entirely superseded by Speculative, the members of the former no longer working in Guilds but striving to keep alive their old form of fellowship. In the year 1641 Sir Robert Moray, Quartermaster-General of the Scottish Army, was initiated in Newcastle, i.e, on English soil, by the Edinburgh Lodge, at a meeting convened specially for his reception almost on the field of battle. This distinguished soldier and philosopher was a Founder and the first President of the Royal Society. Five years later one of the greatest scholars of the seventeenth century, the Rosicr

ucian philosopher Elias Ashmole (founder of the Ashmolean museum at Oxford) was "made a Freemason" at Warrington, on the 16th October, 1646. In 1665 Randle Holm (to whom we are indebted for a copy of the "Antient Charges", the so-called Harleian Manuscript), described himself as a Freemason. Accretions to the ranks of the Craft proceeded to be made, but were at first few and gradual, owing to disturbed political conditions. In 1717 four Old London Lodges were prompted to combine in order to constitute a new nucleus. From them the first Grand Lodge was formed and thus modern Speculative Freemasonry was born, at an inn, The Apple Tree Tavern, in Lincoln's Inn Fields, In 1721 Dr. Anderson was entrusted by Grand Lodge with the task of drawing up the Constitutions of the new community, and these were published in 1723 when the Society announced its existence to the popular world.

The purpose of this study so far has been to formulate briefly, for the benefit, for the benefit of students, certain facts that illustrate that both historical research and other considerations point to the conclusion that we owe the inception of Speculative Freemasonry to group of Initiates who devised and projected the general design in the 16th and 17th centuries to keep alive the universal tradition of the Divine Mysteries at the critical period when the modern mechanical and industrial age was about to set in. In the words of a leading Masonic authority (W.Bro.A.E.Waite), they "made an experiment upon the mind of the age" by restoring to the modern world the traditional mystic wisdom and science formerly taught in the Mysteries, but which during the sway of the Roman Empire, had been withdrawn from the knowledge of the public, although it had been perpetuated in secret. It was they who inspired the movement which has now grown into our vast Masonic system; they grafted the elementary principles of the secret science upon the organisations of the then decaying Building Guilds and left it heavily veiled and crypticised, with the sure knowledge that the seed planted therein would come to fruition in due season. All great movements towards human betterment - and we must certainly number Freemasonry among them - will be found to have come to birth in circumstances of obscurity, and to have been Founded by wise men who are usually unknown as historical personalities. Such movements also pass through an evolutionary progress, from a rudimentary, to an ultimately advanced condition, the extent of the advance being in proportion to the force and vitality of the truth looked up in them which serves as their motive power. Of this nature has been the evolutionary history of the Craft hitherto, but its evolution is still far from complete. The dynamic energies implanted in the Craft by its Founders have now expanded into a vast framework. This process of expansion has been essential, because before the true spirit and inward content of Freemasonry could be appreciated upon a scale sufficiently wide to constitute the Order a real spiritual power in the social body, it has been necessary to build up a vigorous physical organisation as a vehicle in which that spirit may eventually manifest. The growth of an institution is a slow growth, proceeding from material apparently unpromising, and involving continual selection, before it becomes finally forged into an efficient instrument. So with the Masonic Order; as a physical vehicle, a material organisation, it is as complete, as elaborated and as efficiently controlled, as it can ever be expected to be. It now stands waiting illumination, and that illumination must come from within itself, even as the Divine Presence is represented as manifesting within the symbolic Temple of Solomon. The Order awaits the liberation and realisation of its own inner consciousness, hitherto dormant, and this fact is amply demonstrated in that no sooner is the deeper and

true nature of the Masonic design revealed to the Brethren than they leap to the recognition of it and desire to realise it; and, for such, there can be no going back to the old ways and old outlooks. In this manner, then, will the Craft throughout the world become gradually regenerated in its understanding, so fulfilling the destiny planned for it by those who inspired its formation three centuries ago.

The coming change must, and will, disclose that the Masonic creed is essentially spiritual, and that all its articles relate to interior conditions, principle and processes. It will be found to be based upon experimental knowledge, not on authority, and its central figures are to be regarded in the light of attributes, qualities and sacraments (mysteries), not persons, nor events, however great or remarkable. For persons and events belong to time and to the phenomenal, while principles and processes are eternal and noumenal. Freemasons, therefore, are called upon to reflect that history and individual entities must ever be regarded as constituting the accidental, and not the essential element in a system which aims at repairing the errors of the past fifteen centuries, by reconstructing the Mysteries on a scientific and intelligent basis. Further, one important reparation must, and will, be made as the direct result of enlightenment. Today by a tacit and quite unwarranted convention members of the Craft avoid mention in Lodge of the Christian Master, and confine scriptural readings and references almost exclusively to the Old Testament, the motive being to observe the injunction as to refraining from religious discussion and to prevent offence on the part of Brethren who may not be of the Christian faith. This motive is an entirely misguided one and is, of course, negated by the fact that the "Greater Light" upon which every Candidate is obligated, and to which his earnest attention is recommended from the moment of his admission to the Order, is not only the Old Testament, but the Volume of the Sacred Law in its entirety. Freemasons will come to recognise that the New Testament is as essential as the Old, not merely on account of its moral teaching, but in virtue of its constituting the record of the Mysteries in their supreme form and historic culmination. It will be perceived that the Gospels, like the Masonic Degrees, are a record of preparation and illumination, leading up to the ordeal of death, followed by a raising from the dead and the attainment of Mastership, and they exhibit the process of initiation carried to the highest conceivable degree of attainment. Thus the Craft will learn that the Grand Master and Exemplar of Freemasonry, Hiram Abiff, is but a figure of the Great Master, and Saviour of the world, the divine Architect by whom all things were made, and without whom is nothing that hath been made. Neither the Ancient Mysteries, nor Modern Freemasonry, their descendant, can be rightly viewed without reference to their relation to the Christian evangel, into which the pro-Christian schools became assumed. Hence we find that St. Augustine affirms (Retractationes, 1, 13, 3), "the identical thing that we now call the Christian religion existed among the ancients, and has not been lacking from the beginnings of the human race." A study of Patristic literature makes it quite clear that the primitive method of the Christian Church was not the one which now obtains, under which the religious offices and teaching are administered to the whole public alike and in a manner implying a common level of doctrine for all and uniform power of comprehension by every member of the congregation. It was, on the contrary, a graduated method of instruction and identical with the Masonic system of Degrees conferred by reason of advancing merit and ability. Admission to the early Church was by three ceremonial degrees exactly corresponding with those of Freemasonry, as the

following quotation from one of the most instructive of the early Christian treatises proves conclusively:

"The most holy initiation of the Mystic Rites has as its first Godly purpose the holy cleansing of the initiated; and as second, the enlightening instruction of the purified; and finally and as the completion of the former, the perfecting of those instructed in the science of their appropriate instructions". (Dionysius: On the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy).

Originally, therefore, membership of the Christian Church involved a sequence of three initiatory rites, and the names given to those who had qualified in those Rites, together with their modern equivalents in the Craft today, are respectively:-

FIRST DEGREE: CATECHUMENS. ENTERED APPRENTICES.

SECOND DEGREE: LEITURGOI. FELLOWCRAFTS.

THIRD DEGREE: PRESBYTERS. MASTER MASONS.

Their first degree signified re-birth and purification of the heart; the second was concerned with the illumination of the intelligence; and the third related to a total death unto sin (self-centred individuality) and a new birth unto righteousness, in which the Candidate died with Christ on the Cross, as in our modern Order he is made to imitate the death of Hiram, and was raised to that higher order of life (organic integration - resurrection in Christ, the Universal Manhood) which is Mastership. When Christianity became a state-religion and the Church a world-power, the materialisation of its doctrine proceeded apace and has only increased with the centuries. For this reason the science of regeneration has long been, and still is, outside the scope of orthodox religion. But despite inhibition on the part of official orthodoxy the wisdom and the traditional methods of the Mysteries have never been without living witnesses in the world, and since their suppression in the sixth century the tradition and teaching have been continued in secret and under various concealments; and to this continuation, our present Masonic system is due. Like the light of a Master Mason which never becomes wholly extinguished, so in the world's darkest days the light of the Mysteries never goes out entirely, and, if, in comparison with other witnesses, Freemasonry is shown to be but a glimmering ray, it is none the less a true ray from the world's central altar-flame. Hence, the attention of the modern Craft may be directed to the words of the well known hymn, "Lead Kindly Light", for indeed it is sufficient to lead us on amid the encircling gloom, until the now day shall dawn; Light is granted to us in proportion to the desire of our hearts, and have we not affirmed that, "Light is the predominant wish of our hearts"?

The Masonic system was devised at a time of general unrest and change when spiritual life was running extremely low and the modern intellectual, mechanical and industrial era was about to commence. In such circumstances something had to be done in order to preserve the universal mystical tradition, and this "something" had to be of such a nature that it would at the same time provide an introduction to the root principles and methods of the Secret Doctrine of Initiation for the benefit of any who could discern and profit by them during

the period of spiritual obsouration. As we have seen, following upon the decision come to by certain Illuminates calling themselves members of the "Invisible Society," Speculative Freemasonry emerged in the year 1723 as a system of morality presented in the form of Ritual. From that time to the present the process of development has gone steadily forward, and however misunderstood and misapplied have been the rites and ceremonies, it at last may be affirmed that the soul and consciousness of every voluntary participant in them, stands imperishably impressed with the memory of them. The familiar axiom, "Once a Mason always a Mason" expresses an occult truth not realised by those who are unaware of the subjective value and persistence of deliberated actions. Let it therefore be clearly understood that the incorporation of each Candidate in the "body of Freemasonry" means also an addition to the aggregate volume of the group Masonic consciousness, and that following this incorporation reactions and consequences ensue of a nature too abstruse to dilate upon here. Meanwhile, tintured and affected by this metaphysical influence from the subjective world, the work of the Craft proceeds within this bourne of time and place; beginning, as we have ample evidence to show, with tendencies of the natural order and following along the line of the law of orderly development as propounded in the dictum of St. Paul, recorded in the First Epistle to the Corinthians, Chapter 15, verse 46, "Howbeit, that was not first which is spiritual, but that which is natural, and afterward that which is spiritual". Operative Masonry preceded and became spiritualised into Speculative, and the crude beginnings of the latter are now becoming sublimated into a more subtle conception and tending towards a scientific mysticism, at once theoretic and practical. We may, then with confidence, look forward to the gradual spiritualisation of the Craft and to its becoming - when time and circumstances permit - the porchway or entrance to a still more advanced expression of the Sacred Mysteries. But, at the same time we must never forget that the Craft will only become what its individual members make it, and if they continue to see in it only a ceremonial procedure, at such it will remain. Let us then strive, each one of us, to realize and make our own the living spirit and intention which lies behind the outward rites, and enter into the Mystical Quest for that "which is lost," when we ourselves find we shall be able to communicate to our fellow seekers, until the Craft is justified of all its Brethren and becomes - as it was intended to become - a great light in a dark world.

Finally, the future of the Order cannot be appraised without reference to the general social life surrounding it; for it is not something apart and detached from that life but an integral element of it, and between the two there is perpetual interaction and reaction. It follows, therefore, that in the fleeting glimpses of the revival of the Masonic philosophy which are even now discernable as taking place within the Craft, may be seen at once the token and the agent of the world's deliverance. For, Brethren of the Craft, it means the supersession of a period of obsouration by one of illumination, in which men can once more rise from the appreciation of the Form to that of the Substance, of the Letter to that of the Spirit, and thus discern the meaning of the Divine Word, whether written or enacted. This recognition of the ideal will signify the reconstruction of the religious life upon a scientific basis, and of science upon a religious basis. So long as Masonry continues to build upon the mere facts of phenomena and history, she builds upon a sandbank, on which the still advancing tide of scientific and academic criticism is ever encroaching, and which sooner or later must be swept away with all that is founded upon it. But, when She (Masonry -

intuitional understanding) learns the secret of the HIRAMIC, that is the Esoteric interpretation, then, and then only, does She build upon a Rock or Foundation, which shall never be shaken. Such is the import of the name HIRAM (As the Spirit of Understanding, the name HIRAM or HERMES signifies both ROCK and INTERPRETER) the Foundation of the Masonic Temple, and it is on this Hermetic Rock of inward illumination and spiritual life, called the Mount of Regeneration, that the great Mystics of all time have ever taken their stand. Hereon were founded the Pythagorean and Neoplatonic Schools, the system of the Alexandrian Gnostics, and the various Lodges of semi-oriental philosophy of Egypt and Asia Minor in the centuries immediately preceding the Christian era. And in later days the self same illumination formulated itself by the lips of and pens of the Initiates of the thirteenth and following centuries - the epoch of St. Bernard, of Eckhart, Tauler, Ruysbroeck. In the early eighteenth century Speculative Freemasonry emerged, heavily veiled and crypticised, but proclaiming itself in the direct line of succession of the Ancient Wisdom. It is true that in our day, even as the Old Teacher declares, "Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: and with all thy getting get understanding" (Proverbs 4, 7), and this counsel may well be commended to the Masonic Fraternity, which at present so little understands its own system. But, understanding depends upon the gift of the Supernal Light, and this gift in turn depends upon the ardour of our desire for it. If Wisdom today is widowed, let us not forget that all Freemasons are actually or potentially the Widow's sons, and she will be justified of those of her children who labour for her and thus obey the injunction, "Exalt her, and she shall promote thee" (Proverbs 4, 8). Brethren of the Craft, "now is the time to perform our allotted task"!

"EST IN MERCURIO QUICQUID QUOERUNT SAPIENTES" (All is in the understanding that the wise seek). Hermetic Motto.