

## **SYMBOLS — WHAT ARE THEY?**

*By H. L. Haywood - NY Masonic Outlook May 1933.*

If You Will copy off on a large sheet of paper forty or fifty of the most widely used definitions of Freemasonry of the past two centuries your eye will be struck by one out standing fact, perhaps it is the outstanding fact: with few exceptions all of them take it for granted that Freemasonry hides, conceals, or disguises its teachings behind its symbols, or at best that they merely suggest or illustrate its meanings.

Symbols are not, and cannot be, a species of camouflage, veils, darkness—designed to obscure or mislead. They are, and they must be, the exact opposite. Their nature and function is not to conceal, but to reveal; not to observe, but to express. The notion that Freemasonry employs a whole system of symbolism solely for the purpose of withholding its teachings from its own members has been the most disastrous blunder in the whole history of the Craft; in the last analysis it amounts to arguing that Masonry says one thing but means another; this weakens the force of its authority, transforms the ritual into one long puzzle, and bewilders all except the most learned with the unhappy feeling that they have no way of discovering what it is that they have obligated themselves to practice and to believe.

Scientists, mathematicians, philosophers and artists, none of whom are addicted to occultism or sworn to secrecy, employ symbols as a matter of course. They know the human mind to be so made that symbolism is a necessity to it; neither thought nor the communication of thought can be carried on without it; lacking it there could be no such thing as knowledge and therefore no such thing as science. If one were to tell any scholar, scientist or artist that symbols are to conceal ideas he would be laughed at for his pains; they know that symbols are themselves ideas and that no idea can be expressed and concealed at one and the same time.

A symbol is first of all an object in its own right with its own immediate uses and meanings. An hour glass, for example, is, to begin with, simply an hour-glass, a species of clock, by which time is measured. A twenty-four-inch rule is a measuring rod that every carpenter, mason or machinist carries about with him for daily, practicable purposes. A circle drawn by a geometrician on a piece of paper is nothing but a circle; an architect may make use of it to construct the arch over a window, an engineer may employ it for the purpose of manufacturing a steel pulley. Each is what it appears to be; there is no more mystery about it than there is about a lump of dirt or a glass of water.

At the same time each familiar object is an instance or specimen of some general practice, or rule, or law, or idea, or principle, or truth. The hour-glass is but one of the countless instances of the fact of time, which operates as one of the primary and universal realities in human experience. The rule is but one instance of the principle of measurement, and measurement is a cardinal necessity everywhere which takes a thousand forms—a liquid may be measured in a cup, distance is measured by the rule, weight is measured by a scale, ignorance is measured according to an accepted standard of enlightenment, music is measured according to a system of beats, thought is measured by the degree of its approximation to the truth; without all such modes and methods of measurement human life would be impossible.

Confronted by such countless instances, with all their wide variety of forms which may be ever changing, the mind cannot handle them all together, but must simplify its task. It seeks out a law, principle, or idea which rims through and controls them all and makes use of that. To do this it seizes on some significant and familiar instance and uses it to stand for all the other instances or as a simple form or expression of the general truth. The moment it makes use of some one thing for that purpose, and regardless of what that thing may be, the thing becomes a symbol. A symbol thus stands for some general truth but at the same time it is itself an instance, embodiment, or

expression of that truth. It doesn't hide that truth; it expresses it, makes it plain and clear; there is nothing artificial about its symbolical use because it is itself the truth in actual operation.

Thus an hour-glass is at once a clock for measuring time and an instance of the whole idea of time; it possesses, as symbol, a double purpose, for it is both a clock and a representative of the general idea of all possible kinds of clocks. A two-foot rule is in itself nothing but a measuring stick, but at the same time it stands for the whole principle of measurement. A circle first of all is literally nothing but a circle, but as a symbol it becomes an expression of one of the most important of all types of relationship, whether in the natural world or in the human world. In the very nature of the case there cannot be anything queer, occult, hidden or secret about a symbol because its whole being and purpose is to exhibit something, express it, make it dear.

Nobody in his right senses will ever argue that men have all conspired together to conceal their facts and ideas behind a veil of allegory or to hide them in the depths of symbolism! Their motive, of course, always is the exact opposite: to reveal, to communicate, to express, to make clear, and if more and more they are making use of symbolism to that end it is because symbols are so expressive, tell so much in so little, so accurately, and with an intelligibility so universal.

There are in our ritual many elements other than symbolism—emblems, types, dramas and allegories, but in so far as it is composed of symbols the same things may be said of each and every one of them that has been said in the above paragraphs about symbols in general. Their one and only purpose is to make dear to every Mason what it is that Masonry teaches and what is expected of him.

Freemasonry is one of the great teaching institutions like the school, the church, the press, and similar organizations; where it differs from them is not in its use or understanding of symbols but in its exclusive use of a system of symbols as its method of teaching. Where they use books, speeches, lectures, written statements, creeds, all expressed in a form of words, it uses symbols and symbols only. There are words and lectures in our ritual but their place is not primary; their only function is to present or to explain the symbol.

It is because this is true that symbolism is of such paramount importance to every Mason. If he is indifferent to the symbols, does not know how to use them, leaves them alone, makes no effort to understand them, he must necessarily miss the whole meaning of Masonry and stand incapacitated to be a Mason or to live his life. And a Lodge that leaves them out of its room, or slurs them over, or treats them as quaint curiosities survived from the Middle Ages is in so far in the real sense not a Masonic Lodge at all, but has missed its calling and is defeating its own end. Without its symbols Freemasonry necessarily is dumb because it has no other voice; if its own members pass them by its influence in their lives is paralyzed because it is through its symbols that it must operate on their minds, if at all.

Nothing is more urgently necessary in the Craft, tragically necessary, here or elsewhere, than the recovery—perhaps it is better to say, the discovery of the place symbols hold in our Craft and of their proper function in the experience of Masons. To teach and expound them, to require of a candidate that he study them, to help, aid and assist worthy Master Masons to know what they are all about— is not a side issue not a pleasant diversion but a need so cardinal that if it isn't done more thoroughly than it is now there is no telling what will happen to the Craft in the future.

Why doesn't the Craft state its teachings in so many words and be done with it, instead of this puzzling, roundabout use of symbols?" This is an old question, but it is always the plain confession of a lack of understanding of the nature of the Craft and of the method it must always employ to effect its purpose. The answer to the question penetrates to one of the most deeply-rooted of all the 'secrets' of our art. In the broadest sense of the words, and other things being equal, a man is made a Mason for the express purpose of causing him to study, understand,

accept and practice the symbols. They are not pointers toward Masonry, pictures here of what Masonry is there, illustrations or commentaries of it; they are themselves Masonry, they are what it is, they are at first-hand and in their own right its teachings, principles, ideals.

And it is in the very process of understanding and assimilating them that a member grows into Masonic manhood. In them he finds the life he is pledged and called upon to live. His mind is developed by his work of studying them. His intellect is sharpened and disciplined by the toil of overcoming their difficulties. His imagination is enlarged and enriched by his insights into their significance. His character is strengthened by his effort to translate them into his own practice. His life takes shape and becomes harmoniously ordered as he follows their lead.

Others may help him, books may instruct him, but it is for him chiefly to use his own wits, employ his own faculties, make his own observations, do his own reflecting, compare one symbol with another and discover how each is related to the system as a whole; by these methods, so remote from the easy acceptance of opinions and ideas at second-hand, which is the curse that always dogs the use of the printed page, a man grows. He can't help but grow, because he is using his own faculties to some purpose.

It was for this that he was initiated in the first place; it was to engage in this life-long labor that he was presented with Working Tools in each of the Degrees; it was to this end that he was made a Mason. In the Craft's great system of symbols there stands revealed and expressed one of the truest and mightiest philosophies of human life that our race knows anything about; he whom Initiation has brought into its presence, and who has inherited it by virtue of his membership, has received a possession beyond all possible computation in any of the ten thousand terms of money or riches.

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**Masonic Bits and Bytes: Have any symbols been added or omitted in modern times? A few.** In old engraved certificates, most of which depict an assemblage of symbols and emblems, you will encounter now and then one that is no longer in use, at least in America; the chisel, for example, the skirret, etc. The symbol of the Virgin Weeping over the Broken Column is about one hundred and seventy years old and was devised in America. What we call the due-guard is by many scholars believed to be also an "Americanism." The flag is now an officially adopted Lodge emblem in some Grand Jurisdictions. It needs to be remembered that until about seventy-five years ago Jurisdictions had no official, uniform ritual; prior to that time a certain number of changes, additions and omissions occurred here and there. But these changes, like present variations from State to State, were in details only; in all essentials and fundamentals the ritual has not changed for about two hundred and seventy years.