



## **LODGE VEGAS # 32**

### **APPROACHING THE EAST**

This portion of the ceremony has many things to tell us, which, for the sake of simplification, we may break into three divisions:

(1) The Symbolism of the Cardinal Points; (2) Orientation; (3) The Meaning of the Candidate's Approach to the East.

Symbolism of the Cardinal Points, North, South, East and West. Mackey uses as an illustration of this the fact that the sun in its summer journey never passes north of  $23^{\circ} 28'$ , and that a wall built anywhere above that will have its northern side entirely in shadow even when the sun stands at his meridian. As this fact became known to early peoples it led them to look upon the North as the place of darkness. Accordingly, in all ancient mythologies, that portion of space was regarded with suspicion and even with terror. This prejudice was carried over into the Middle Ages, and traces of it, often dim and vague, survive to this day in popular customs. In his "Antiquities of Freemasonry," Fort writes that the "North by the Jutes was denominated black or somber; the Frisians called it 'Fear corner.' The gallows faced North, and from these hyperborean shores beyond the North everything base and terrible proceeded." To the churchmen of medieval times it carried a like sinister meaning, as we may read in "Animal Symbolism in Ecclesiastical Architecture" (E. P. Evans, p. 258):

"The north is the region of meteorological devils, which, under the dominion and leadership of the 'Prince of the power of the air' produce storms and convulsions in Nature and foster unruly passions and deeds of violence in man. The evil principle, as embodied in unclean beasts and exhibited in obscene and lascivious actions, was properly portrayed in the sculptures and paintings on the north side of the church, which was assigned to Satan and his satellites, and known as 'the black side.'" Milton connects Satan with the North, and Shakespeare speaks of demons "who are substitutes under the lonely monarch of the north." This cardinal point has a similar meaning in Masonry, and the portion of the lodge on the northern side should contain no furniture or lights.

By token of the same symbolic reasoning the South stands for all that is opposed to the North; in that direction the sun reaches his meridian to pour out light, warmth, and

beauty. Accordingly, church builders of old time were wont to depict on the South wall of their churches the triumphs of Christianity, and the millennial reign of Christ. In the lodge the Corinthian column, type of beauty, is placed in the South at the station of the Junior Warden. It is the place of High Twelve, and the scene of the labours of the Craft.

As the West is the place of the sun's setting and of the closing of the day it stands for rest, for darkness, and for death. In Operative Lodges it was the place set apart for finished work. In Greek mythology it was the place of Hades, that is, darkness and death. As we may read in Sophocles

"Life on life downstricken goes  
Swifter than the wild birds' flight,  
Swifter than the Fire-God's might,  
To the westering shores of Night."

Tennyson makes Arthur to go into the West and Ulysses to travel beyond the baths of the setting sun; and at this day, it is said, soldiers in the trenches of Europe speak of a dead comrade as having "gone West." To the West all men come at last, men and Masons, to the beautiful, tender West, and lay them down in the sleep that knows no waking.

If there is one symbol that recurs again and again in our Blue Lodge Ritual, like a musical refrain, it is the East; of this I almost despair to speak, save in crudest outline, so rich and so many-sided is the truth enshrined in it. As the centre of gravity is to the earth, and all things thereon, so is the East to a Masonic Lodge; the Master sits there, the representative of a complete humanity; the Blazing Star shines there, the mystic "G" at the centre of the rays; it is the bourne, the goal, the ultimate destination, towards which the whole Craft moves. How it came to have this significance for early societies, as well as for our own may be made clear as we turn our attention to Orientation.

## II

In early Egypt, as Norman Lockyer tells us in his "Dawn of Astronomy," the most brilliant of all works on Orientation, and as authoritative as it is readable, it was the custom to dedicate a temple to some planet or star, to the moon in one of her phases, or to the sun at one of his various periods. Originally, perhaps, a majority of the temples were dedicated to the rising sun; in that event the building was so situated that on a given day in the year the light of the sun would pass between the pillars at the entrance and fall upon the altar at the moment of his first appearance above the horizon. This placing of the temple so as to face the dawn gave rise to the term "Orientation," which means "finding the

east." However, other temples were directed toward the moon or some star, and this also, by an accommodation of language, was called Orientation. The term was further used, in after days, when a building or a city was laid out in harmony with the cardinal points;

according to this usage the City of Rome was oriented, for its first form was a quadrangle with a gate facing in each direction. ("A.Q.C.," vol. iv, p. 87.) This custom was practised by the Jews, and indeed may be considered as universal throughout the ancient world. Moreover it was carried over into Christian customs, for all the early churches were oriented to the sun, the Apostolic Constitutions specifying that a church must be "an oblong form, and directed to the east."

Inasmuch as the orienting of a temple was chiefly for the purpose of permitting the light to fall on its altar on a given day, the altar was necessarily placed in the west end of the building. This arrangement must also have been often used by the Jews, even though they did reverse so many "heathen" customs, for Dr. Wynn Westcott tells us that, "It is clear that both Mosaic Tabernacle and the Temple of Solomon had the Holy Place at the west." But, he goes on to say, and this is a point especially deserving of our attention, "it is equally certain that churches from the earliest Christian development have always reversed the positions when possible." This is to say that, though Christian houses of worship were placed east and west as heathen temples had been, they were built with their altars in the east end instead of in the west. It is from the Christian churches of Mediæval times, perhaps, that the Operative Masons derived their practice of placing the Master's station in the East.

The pagans saw in the sun a symbol of Deity, its rays an emblem of the Divine forth-shining; accordingly they had the sun, or a representation of the sun, in the East.

We also worship a Deity whom we have clothed with Light, but in our East is no longer the natural sun, or even a representation thereof, but a man, the Master. To my mind this is a thing of significance, though I can not place the weight of the name of any one of our authorities behind the interpretation. Ancient peoples, like ourselves, were in search of God, even as are we. They hoped to find Him in nature, among the things that He had made, even as the Wise Men followed a star in their search for Him; but whereas they went "through Nature to God," we go "through man to God," and believe that His completes unveiling will be found in the perfected human soul, even as the Master of Masters said, "He that hath seen ME hath seen the Father."

### III

If this interpretation of the East is valid, as I believe that it is, the candidate's "approach to the East" is a symbolic art of far-reaching meaning, for it signifies nothing less than that he has tuned his will toward the perfecting of his own human nature in order to enter into communion with the Divine; if he is compelled to advance by a certain regulated manner it is in token of the fact that the soul itself is a realm of law and that he who would reach the soul's highest development must walk in harmony with the spirit's laws; and if, in the succeeding degrees, his manner of approach approximates more and more toward a perfect step it is in recognition of the necessity of gradual and orderly progress in the highest growth. Always and everywhere, in whatever condition or task a man finds himself, if he would "go up into the seer's house," he must mount by those virtues of Purity, Beauty, and Truth which are the hidden laws of the heart.

## THE ALTAR

In the centre of the lodge stands the Altar. It should be cubical in shape, and about three feet in height, and it should have horns at each corner to suggest, in light of a hoary usage, that it is a place of refuge. On the East, the South, and the West should be placed one of the representatives of the three Lesser Lights, but never on the North, for that is the place of darkness. On its top, in due arrangement, should lie the three Grand Lights. Thus arranged it may well be considered "the most important article of furniture in a lodge room," and the ground whereon it stands as "the most holy place." Too universal in its use, both through space and time, to admit of our tracing its history here we must content ourselves with some reference to the ideas embodied in it. To this end let us remember, here and everywhere, that the Masonic life is not that which occurs in the lodge rooms alone, for that is but its allegorical picture, its tracing-board; but it is that which a Mason should do and be in all circumstances, under the inspiration of the Fraternity and its teachings. Thus understood the Altar standing in the centre of the Masonic lodge is the symbol of something that must operate at the centre of the Masonic life.

Often serving as a table whereon the worshipper may lay his gifts to God, the Altar may well remind us of the necessity of that human gratitude which leads us to return to Him the gifts He has showered upon us. This is that teaching of stewardship found in all religions to remind us that our very lives are not our own, having been bought with a price, and that our talents are held in trusteeship to be rendered again to Him to whom they belong. Thus stated, I know, the matter may sound bald and even unappealing, but once we encounter a man who lives his life as a stewardship held in the frail tenure of the flesh, we see to what high issues the character of man may ascend; such personalities carry an atmosphere about with them as of another world, and radiate influences that are light and fragrant. Surely, a man who denied this in his practices can never serve as a living Building Stone in Masonry's Temple!

In its proper sense also the Altar serves as a sanctuary, a place of refuge, and this too has much to tell us, though I am aware of the dangers of moralizing. In the earlier centuries of our era, before the complete development of common law, the hunted criminal, fleeing from his pursuers, would escape to a church and there lay hold of the horns of the Altar; in that he found safety, and an opportunity to prove his innocence, if innocent he was. Out of this arose the beautiful customs of "sanctuary," the chivalrous unselfish harboring of the weak, the sorrowful, and the afflicted. Is there not a sanctuary in Masonry? Certainly there is, for in the Fraternity itself, in the privacy of its inner fellowships, a brother will often find rest for his heart and relief from the bruising of the world; and a man is no true Mason in whose nature there is not at least one inner chamber in which the weary may find rest and the weak may have protection.

More than a table for gifts and a place of sanctuary the Altar has from of old served as the station of sacrifice, and this usage also is recognized in our symbolism, for therein we are taught that the human in us, our appetites, our passions, yea our life itself if need be, must

be laid down in the service of man and the glory of God. How otherwise could Masonry remain Masonry if it is "the subjugation of the human that is in man, by the Divine?"

Of the Altar as a place of prayer we have already spoken, but in this connection we may well ponder a paragraph from Dr. J. F. Newton, composed of those lucid sentences of which he is a master:

"Thus by a necessity of his nature man is ever a seeker after God, touched at times with a strange sadness and longing, and laying aside his tools to look out over the far horizon. Whatever else he may have been—vile, tyrannous, vindictive—the story of his long search after God is enough to prove that he is not wholly base. Rites horrible, and even cruel, may have been a part of his early ritual, but if the history of past ages had left us nothing but the memory of a race at prayer, they would have left us rich. And so, following the good custom of the great ones of former ages, we gather at our Altar lifting up hands in prayer, moved thereto by the ancient need and aspiration of our humanity. Like the man who walked in the grey years of old, our need is for God, the living God, whose presence hallows all our mortal life, even to its last ineffable homeward sigh which men call death."

## THE OBLONG SQUARE

Having discussed the Approach to the East in its First Degree connections there is no need that we go into the matter here, though the Fellow Craft's Approach naturally falls into this place. But there is one problem associated with this rite which was not touched on in the earlier section, and as it occurs in both the First and Second Degrees, it may be fitly studied here; I refer to the Oblong Square. This has long been one of the standing puzzles of Masonry, and that because "oblong square" seems a contradiction in terms, and because no scholar has thus far traced the origin of the Masonic use of this phrase. What it really means is still a mystery, though we may make our guess as other students have done before us.

Mackey defines it as "a parallelogram, or four-sided figure, all of whose angles are equal, but two of whose sides are longer than the others" (rectangle). Following Pierson he finds in it a reference to the ground plan of the lodge room and this, in turn, he sought to trace to the shape of the world as known to the Ancients. From this point of view, we may infer, he saw in the candidate's adjusting his feet to *an* (not *the*) angle of an oblong square an indication of his willingness to stand to and abide by all the laws, rules and regulations of the Craft.

Others have seen in the *oblong square* a reference to the try-square, one of the working tools, when made

"gallows" shape, with one arm longer than the other. To this it may be objected, first that our working tool is properly a stone-mason's try-square with the two arms of equal length

and not divided into inches; and secondly, that the "gallows" square interpretation can not explain the allusion to a "perfect square" in the Third Degree.

Others, again, find in it a suggestion that the stones of bricks used in a wall of masonry are almost never cubes, but bodies longest in their horizontal dimensions, the better to overlap; they say the candidate is to adjust himself to the Oblong Square because he is himself to be built into a wall that must stand while the ages last. But this seems a far-fetched explanation, and, also, does not explain the "perfect square" of the Master Degree.

Brother C. C. Hunt, Deputy Grand Secretary of Iowa, has given another interpretation, and one that seems to me most reasonable. "What, then, is the oblong square of Freemasonry? I believe it to be a survival in our ceremonies of a term once common but now obsolete. My reading has convinced me that at one time the word 'square' meant right-angled, and the term 'a square' referred to a four-sided figure, having four right angles, without regard to the proportionate lengths of adjacent sides. There were thus two classes of squares, those having all four sides equal, and those having two parallel sides longer than the other two. The first class were called 'perfect squares' and the second class 'oblong squares'. In time these terms were shortened to square and oblong respectively, and that is the sense in which they are used at the present time, so that when we speak of an oblong square, we are met with the objection that if it is a square it can not be oblong, and if it is oblong it can not be square. This is true in the present sense of the term, *but Freemasonry still retains the older meaning.*"

support of this, so far as America is concerned, at least, Brother C. F. Irwin of Ohio produced a letter written by a certain Dr. S. P. Hildreth, of Marietta, Ohio, on June 8, 1819, in regard to the fortifications near his city: "On the outside of the parapet, near the *oblong square*, I picked up a considerable number of fragments of ancient potter's ware." Brother Irwin contends that if this term was thus in use in Ohio in 1819 it must have been in use further east much earlier.

If Oblong Square was so used by Masons prior to the seventeenth century it may be that the Speculatives received at that time (they were accepted earlier but not in such numbers) brought with them, as an inheritance from other orders of symbolism, the Perfect Square; and it may be that the framers of our Ritual meant to signify that as the candidate in the preparatory degree is to try himself by an Oblong Square, the Master Mason, as befits the adept of perfection, must adjust himself to the Perfect Square. Thus read, the symbolism as found variously in the Three Degrees, is really a recognition of the fact that the Masonic Life is necessarily progressive, and that a Mason strives toward perfection.

**Symbolical Masonry by H.L. Haywood(1923)**