

## A Masonic Minute

### *The Second Degree*

*'You are now permitted to extend your researches into the hidden mysteries of nature and science.'*

*"The world is but a school of curiosity."* – Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592)

Like the middle child, The Second Degree is sometimes passed over lightly, and considered merely a stepping stone from the First to the Third Degree. While it may lack the excitement of Initiation and the drama of Raising, it is highly significant in its own right. Of the Three Degrees it is the shortest, yet there is much contained within it. If we consider the philosophy of the three degrees of Craft Masonry to represent the three principal stages of human existence – birth, life, and death – then the Second Degree takes on a new perspective, teaching the important lessons of life as we ascend the winding stair. Learning is symbolized by reference to the Seven Liberal Arts and Sciences. The Fellowcraft is presented with the Square of morality and virtue, the Level of equality, and the Plumb Rule of integrity – tools of testing – to prove the accuracy and veracity of his practice of Moral Geometry. These are also the Moveable Jewels that designate the three principal officers of the Lodge.

When the first Grand Lodge came into being in 1717, some Masonic historians suggest that the ritual consisted of only one degree, from which the Fellowcraft was formed by 1720 and the Master Mason by 1723. Others maintain that in 1717 there were two Degrees, corresponding to our first and third, and that the first was divided up to make the first and second. Some validation of this theory may be found in our present Rites. The first two Degrees are very similar in structure, while the Third is quite different in form. <sup>1</sup> Both schools of thought agree that by 1723 there were three degrees.

Much of our knowledge of the verbal content of these degrees comes from the several 'exposures' published in the eighteenth century, the best known of which was Samuel Pritchard's Masonry Dissected published in 1730. The opening and closing dialogue for the three degrees in our ritual retains the form of the early catechisms in use at the time.

It is worth noting that in our jurisdiction, although all business of the Lodge is conducted in the First Degree, including the Election of Officers, the wording of the Installation Ceremony states that the Worshipful Master was "*elected by the Master,*

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<sup>1</sup> See *Beyond the Pillars*, second edition 1999, Chapter 8: Origin of the Ritual and of the Three Degrees, a lecture given by the eminent English Freemason, Bro. Harry Carr.

*Wardens, and Fellows in open lodge assembled.*” In the ceremonies compiled by M.W. Bro. Otto Klotz for Dedicating a Lodge Hall and Consecrating a New Lodge by the Grand Master and Grand Lodge, the Lodge is opened and the ceremonies are conducted in the Second Degree.<sup>2</sup> It might also be mentioned that the Aprons of the two senior officers of Grand Lodge, the Grand Master and the Deputy Grand Master, are embroidered with symbols mentioned in the Lecture given by the Senior Warden in the Second Degree: the pomegranates, the lotus flowers, and seven-eared wheat.<sup>3</sup> Such is the importance of the Second Degree.

The term Fellow is an honorific indicating training and experience, skill and ability in the Craft. It is a designation also found in the academic world, where certain professional Colleges confer diplomas in three grades: Associate, Licentiate, and Fellow.

In the Charge to the Newly Initiated Candidate given at the end of the First Degree, he is admonished “*to make a daily advancement in Masonic knowledge.*” Because we learn best that which we discover for ourselves, Masonry requires us to reflect and consider what is implied in the rites and ceremonies – to read between the lines and think of many things. As Speculative or *thinking* Masons, we must always look below the surface and seek an inner depth and more profound meaning for its symbols and allegories. As the German philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche wrote: “*A thinker sees his own actions as experiments and questions – as attempts to find out something. Success and failure are for him answers above all.*”<sup>4</sup> Nothing focuses our attention better than a question.

Man is a meaning seeking creature; we are by nature inquisitive. Dr. Samuel Johnson identified this human trait: “*Curiosity is one of the permanent and certain characteristics of a vigorous intellect.*” He went further to state: “*Curiosity is, in great and generous minds, the first passion and the last.*”<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the most important question in Freemasonry is, ‘WHY?’

Although he was not a Freemason, Albert Einstein, the renowned physicist of the twentieth century, expressed it thus: “*The important thing is not to stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existing. One cannot help but be in awe when he contemplates the mysteries of eternity, of life, of the marvellous structure of reality. It is*

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<sup>2</sup> Otto Klotz (1817-1892) published in 1874. With slight revisions, in use to the present.

<sup>3</sup> Constitution Section 403 (a) & 405 (a)

<sup>4</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900)

<sup>5</sup> Dr. Samuel Johnson (1709-1784)

*enough if one tries merely to comprehend a little of this mystery every day. Never lose a holy curiosity.”*<sup>6</sup>

There are many incisive questions that are posed by the Second Degree, principal among which are: *Where does the Winding Stair really lead? Why does it turn inward? Where is the Middle Chamber?* The correct answer to these questions encapsulates the essence of the whole philosophy of Freemasonry. Therefore, properly considered, the Second Degree takes on great significance and heightened importance. It is at the very heart of Freemasonry.

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<sup>6</sup> Albert Einstein (1879-1955)