

The Lodge and it's Furniture

By William Harvey.

PREFACE

Every thoughtful Mason who has pride in his Lodge desires to see it beautifully equipped with furnishings that will add dignity and charm to its walls. I have sought in the following pages to indicate essentials and to dwell upon their significance. The lecture has been delivered to appreciative audiences in various lodges, all of whom have urged that it should receive the permanence of print. I now publish it in the hope that it will stimulate interest amongst brethren of the mystic tie.

The Lodge and its Furniture

The student of Freemasonry who takes his first lesson from one of the many catechisms that circulate among the brethren learns that the form of the Lodge is what is erroneously described as "an oblong square," and that its dimensions are, "in length from E... to W..., in breadth from N... to S..., in depth from the surface of the earth to its centre, and even as high as the heavens"; and he is told that it is of this vast extent "to show the universality of the Science." But, while this represents the Universe as one great Lodge in which Masons all over the world may meet and

Strive to live with love and care
Upon the level by the square

as the ancient Irish inscription has it, the brother becomes increasingly familiar with a Lodge of much lesser extent, and with limits which he can more easily appreciate. To all intents and purposes the building within which he and his brethren meet from time to time for labour and refreshment is the only Lodge he knows, and, if he is of an enquiring turn of mind, he will soon discover that it is a symbol of two very different things. On the one hand it is said to represent the Universe, and on the other it is understood to be modelled more or less upon the Temple of King Solomon. Its furnishing and equipment derive from both, and the blend is not wholly free from confusion. Indeed, it is not possible to separate the two, for at a score of points we find them meeting and conflicting.

The Lodge should be situated due E... and W... and the Craftsman gives three reasons for this: First, because the Sun, the glory of the day, rises in the E... And sets in the W..., thus lighting every part of the universal Lodge; secondly, because Learning originated in the E..., whence it shed its benign influence on the W...; and, thirdly, the Tabernacle erected by Moses in the Wilderness was, by God's special command, situated due E... and W..., and this, in later days, proved the model or ground plan of the Temple erected by the wise King of Israel to the honour and glory of the one true God. It should have its greatest length from E... to W... and its greatest breadth from N... to S... Dr Oliver maintains that the form of the Lodge should be a double cube "as an expressive emblem of the united powers of darkness

and light in the creation, and because the Ark of the Covenant, and the altar of incense were both of that figure.” Dealing with the view that the Lodge is a symbol of the Universe, Bro. Albert G. Mackay puts forward a theory that is ingenious though somewhat fanciful. If, he says, we draw lines on a map of the world, which shall circumscribe just that portion which was known and inhabited at the time of the building of Solomon’s Temple, these lines, running a short distance north and south of the Mediterranean Sea, and extending from Spain to Asia Minor, will form an OBLONG SQUARE, whose greatest length will be from east to west, and whose greatest breadth will be from north to south. The oblong square which thus enclosed the whole habitable part of the globe,” he continues, “would represent the form of the Lodge, to denote the universality of masonry, since the world constitutes the lodge; a doctrine that has since been taught in that expressive sentence: In every clime the Mason may find a home, and in every land a brother.: Mackay’s theory is at first sight plausible, but one ventures to suggest that a CIRCLE rather than an oblong would have been more likely to occur to early students — as it would doubtless be more likely to occur to men today — as the sort of plane surface to symbolise a world that SURROUNDED them in every direction.

Enthusiastic Freemasons, who maintain that the Craft, as an organised institution has existed from time immemorial, tell us that our ancient brethren met beneath no other covering than the cloudy canopy of Heaven, and that because of this, and because the Lodge is a symbol of the Universe, the roof is now decorated to represent the starry firmament. Paine, in his “Essay on the Origin of Freemasonry,” says that, “as the study and contemplation of the Creator in the works of the creation, of which the sun, as the great visible object of the adoration of Druids, all their religious rites and ceremonies had reference to the apparent progress of the sun through the twelve signs of the Zodiac and his influence upon the earth. The Masons,” he continues, “adopt the same practice. The roof of their temples or lodges is ornamented with a sun, and the floor is a representation of the variegated face of the earth, either by carpeting or Mosaic work.” It is clear that Thomas Paine was not too well informed on the subject, and while there is some truth in his description of the roof and floor of the lodge, the Masonic conception of the G.A.O.T.U. is more fitly set forth by Bro. William Hutchinson, an eighteenth century Master, who says in one of his “Lectures,” “The Universe is the Temple of the Deity whom we serve; Wisdom, Strength and Beauty are about His Throne as pillars of His works — for His Wisdom is infinite, His Strength omnipotent, and Beauty shines through the whole of the Creation in symmetry and order. The Heavens He has stretched forth as a Canopy, the Earth he has planted as a footstool; He crowns His Temple with stars as with a diadem, and with His hand He extends the power and glory. The Sun and Moon are messengers of His will, and all His law is concord.” And there cannot be any doubt that, to the modern Christian Freemason at least, the starry roof of his Lodge is a symbol pointing him to the Grand Lodge above where the World’s great Architect rules and reigns for ever.

While there is general agreement in the view that the roof of the Lodge is decorated to represent the canopy of Heaven, there is some confusion of thought in connection with the meaning of the covering of the floor. The tracing board, the chequered pavement, and the richly decorated carpet have been confounded one with another, and, even among authorities, it is difficult to find anything approaching harmony. One thing is abundantly plain — that, as the roof was painted to represent the starry sky, so the floor was intended

to symbolise the fruitful earth. The Catechisms that speak with all the authority of age tell us that the Mosaic pavement is the beautiful flooring of the Lodge, with the Blazing Star in the centre, and the Indented or Tessellated Border as the skirtwork. The beautiful flooring, we are further told, by reason of its being variegated and chequered, points out to us the diversity of objects which decorate and adorn the whole creation, the animate as well as the inanimate parts thereof. The Blazing Star, or Glory in the centre refers us to the Sun, which enlightens the earth, and by its benign influence dispenses its blessings to mankind in general, which the Indented or Tessellated Border points us to the Planets, which, in their various revolutions, form a beautiful border or skirtwork round the glorious luminary of the day, as the other does round a Mason's Lodge.

This description of the floor, which has come down from bygone times, is now very generally applied to the carpet of black and white squares which is found in nearly every Lodge. That it is wholly inapplicable must instantly be apparent to every brother who gives a moment's thought to the matter. The carpet is not variegated or many-coloured. It has no richly decorated border that could by any stretch of imagination symbolise the movements of the planets. It seems to be nothing else than the squared pavement which according to one not-very-well-founded tradition, formed the ground floor of the Temple, and according to another equally ill-founded was the platform or dais upon which the High Priest walked when offering up the sacrifice of incense at the golden altar. Certain students, seeing the difficulty of reconciling the chequered floorcloth of today with the richly variegated carpet alluded to in the catechisms have suggested that what we now call Tracing Boards were formerly cloths which were spread upon the floor for the purpose of instruction. But here again there is obvious error. If one thing is clear it is that the floor was meant to represent nature in all its varied aspects. No Tracing Board does that. The Tracing Boards of the various degrees concern themselves wholly with pictorial representations of our emblems and symbols, and bear no relation whatever to the highly decorated flooring of the Lodge which, in its earliest signification, sought to symbolise the bounties and blessings of Mother Nature.

The question now arises — were the floors of Lodges ever so ornamented, or was the decoration — like the dimensions of the Lodge — merely an imaginary conceit on the part of those brethren who were instrumental in framing and establishing Speculative Freemasonry as we know it? I have never seen any illustration or description of a carpet that was not wither a Chequered pavement of black and white squares or a Tracing Board made up on symbols, and I incline therefore to the view that the flooring as representative of the riches of old Mother Earth was wholly imaginative. If this be so, whence came the idea?

“The Ancients, and especially the Greeks,” says Bailey, “adorned their floors, pavements of temples, palaces, etc., with Mosaic, or rather Musaic work; a work composed of many stones, or other matters of different colours, so disposed as to represent divers shapes of ornaments, birds, etc.” Critics are divided as to the origin and reason of the name “Mosaic.” According to Mr. John Fellows, “Mosaic, or Musaic, work represents the variegated face of the earth in the places where the ancients used formerly to hold their religious assemblies,” and he adds that an imitation of it was made when temple worship was introduced, to reconcile people to the change. La Pluche is more explicit. Referring to agriculture in Egypt, he says, “The rural work not being resumed till after the Nile had quitted the plain, the

Egyptians for this reason gave the public sign of husbandry the name of Moses, **SAVED FROM THE WATERS**; and on the same account the nine moons, during which Orus, Apollo, or husbandry continued his exercises, went by the same name. Isis used to clothe herself in such dresses as were agreeable to the different seasons of the year. To announce the beginning of spring, which overspreads and enamels the earth with flowers and verdure, she wore carpets of different colours." The fairly plain meaning of all this, as bearing upon Freemasonry, is that the early devisers of the Science, who desired the brotherhood to look from Nature up to Nature's God, borrowed the idea of the richly-decorated floor as a symbol of the fruitful earth from some of the early religions. I think it may be added that they have been successful in giving thousands of Freemasons even though it may have been rarely, if indeed ever, clothed with material pictorial form on the actual floor of any Lodge.

In considering the Lodge as a symbol of the Universe it may be said that all is done when we have dealt with the roof, which indicates the sky, and the floor, which suggests the earth. To the walls we give the names of the cardinal points of the compass — but beyond doing so, little else may be said as E... and W... and N... and S... are merely expressions of space and are not capable of being presented in any concrete form that would render them intelligible to finite minds.

The Lodge, or meeting-place of the brethren, may next be regarded as a symbol of the Temple and Tabernacle. We have learned that it is situated due E... and W... because these places of Jewish worship were so set down, and when we are informed that the Lodge stands on holy ground, we have a further reference to Jewish faith for this, Masonic tradition affirms, is in allusion to the three grand offerings which met with divine approbation, namely — Abraham's willingness to offer up Isaac, the prayers and ejaculations of David which stayed the pestilence, and the many thanksgivings, sacrifices, and offerings made by Solomon in connection with the building, completion and dedication of the Temple.

Dr Albert G. Mackay tells us that Masons on the Continent of Europe have a prescribed order or ritual of building to which every hall for Masonic purposes must conform. No such regulation exists in this country, but the usages of the Craft have sanctioned certain conditions, and I think there is an instinctive desire on the part of every true Freemason to have a building that, for seemliness and dignity will do honour to the brotherhood. The form of the Lodge-room should be that of a parallelogram, otherwise the familiar "oblong square," at least one-third larger from E... to W... than from N... to S.... A portion about one-fourth of the entire floor space should be partitioned off from the main hall and then divided into two rooms, one in which the Tyler may receive brethren, and the other in which candidates may be prepared or visitors tested. The ceiling of the main hall should be lofty, to give dignity to the appearance of the building and to secure the health of the brethren by compensating for closed windows. The main hall, or Lodge-room proper, should be approached by two doors, one on either side of the S.W.'s station and leading from the two rooms already mentioned, namely, the Tyler's room and the preparation room. A slightly elevated platform reached by three steps should extend along the whole of the east end of the Lodge. If possible, the building should be lit from the roof, but where this cannot be secured windows should be let into the wall, the sill, according to the Helvetian ritual, being

at least seven and a half feet from the floor, so as to secure the brethren and their mysteries from the curious gaze of the outer world.

The floor of the platform at the east end is usually covered with a cloth of black and white squares, and, as the platform is set aside for the accommodation of the Master and other chief officers, it may be that this is really the correct symbol of that chequered pavement upon which the High priest walked, and which is now used as the covering of the main floor and confused with the multi-coloured carpet of tradition.

So far as can be gathered, the floor of the Lodge was not covered until comparatively modern times. The late Bro Speth, writing in "Ars Quatuor Coronatorum" (Vol VI, p.105) says, "As far back as we can go, we find that the tracing board was figured in chalk or charcoal on the floor of the lodge-room and washed out when the ceremonies ended." The late Bro. E.A.T. Reed is a little more explicit on the subject. In a paper on Masonic Tracing Boards which he contributed to "Lodge of Research Transactions, 1903-4," he supplies a description of an old-time Lodge, "The room in which they met," he says, "being bare boards, was sprinkled with sand; when, however, there was an initiation, and probably on other special occasions, a space in front of the Master's pedestal, or in the centre of the room, was left or swept clear of sand, and in this clear space the Tyler drew with chalk, charcoal, and blue stone, or some of these substances, the ground plan of a building or other geometrical figure . . . which was termed 'drawing the Lodge,' and if there had been an initiation it was incumbent on the initiate to wash this drawing out before the Lodge was closed, and neither rank nor position exempted him from the discharge of this office."

Perhaps the very simplest form of a Lodge is that described by Bro. Ladislas de Malczovich in his "Sketch of the Earlier History of Masonry in Austria and Hungary," which he contributed to the Transactions of Lodge Quatuor Coronati in 1892. "The room where the brethren of Austria and Hungary assembled was, in those times (i.e., the middle of the eighteenth century) adorned with no symbols at all. In whatever room a Lodge could be held," he writes, "an oblong quadrangle was drawn WITH CHALK on the floor, WITHIN which all the members found room. Later on they drew a smaller quadrangle, ROUND which the brethren assembled. Afterwards this quadrangle was STREWN with SAND, and symbols temporarily inscribed, finally the drawn and painted tracing boards (TAPIS) became fashionable."

This custom in Austria and Hungary is not vastly different from what we find at home. As movable Tracing Boards came into popular use the need of drawing designs upon the floor passed away; and probably in deference to a rowing sense of seemliness and dignity, the simple but impressive chequered carpet of modern times became part of the equipment of the Lodge. It is generally accepted that this carpet is the present-day representative of the traditional squared pavement of the Temple, but a contributor to "Miscellanea Latomorum" (Vol. III, p.65) makes the interesting suggestion that it may be a survival of the operative's Tracing Board, which, he says, "was ruled in squares (or lozenges, equal to two equilateral triangles on opposite sides of the same base) to ensure accuracy in setting out designs."

The Carpet which is now an almost necessary part of the furnishing of a Lodge, and is regarded as one of the "Ornaments" is looked upon as "sacred" by one group of Masonic Students who assert that no one should tread upon it except the candidate and those

officers who take part in the ceremonial, and that other brethren who find it necessary to move about should do so beyond its border. It seems to me an unnecessary investiture of sanctity, and I have not seen any explanation of how a brother entering or retiring from a Lodge could reach the point of salute without trespassing upon this so-called "sacred" ground.

The catechisms set forth that the furniture of the Lodge consists of the Volume of the Sacred Law, the Square, and the Compasses; and these rest upon the Altar, which is the central point of interest for every brother from the moment of his being admitted to the blessing of Masonic light. Considerable difference of opinion exists as to the form and substance of the Altar. There is general agreement that it should be a double cube, but many favour the view that, like its Jewish prototype, it should have four horns, and in America it is sometimes so equipped. It is usually of wood, richly carved, but some authorities maintain that, to be correct, it should be of white marble.

The position of the Three Great Lights has given rise to much discussion, and no agreement has been reached. There are those who maintain that it is not necessary that the Volume of the Sacred Law should be opened, and that a person could be quite properly obligated on the closed book just as he takes the oath in an English court of justice. Others maintain that it should be opened and so placed that the Master in the E... may read from it, while a third section favour the contrary view that it should be reversed so that the candidate may see that it is really the Volume of the Sacred Law.

Even when brethren agree that the Book should be opened they differ as to the particular chapter which should be revealed. Mackay in his "Lexicon" (8th ed., 1883) says that "we have no special directions" about the Chapter at which it ought to be opened, and another expresses the view that "as Psalm cxxxiii. ('Behold how good and pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity') has a general application to all work in the Lodge, it suffices for all degrees." Dr Oliver, dealing with the question in the "Book of the Lodge" (3rd ed., 1864, p.70) says, "In the First Degree it is usually unfolded at Ruth iv., 7; in the Second Degree at Judges xii., 6; and in the Third at I Kings, vii, 13, 14 . . . At different periods during the last (eighteenth) century Genesis xxii. And xxviii. Were indifferently used for the First Degree; I Kings vi., 7, and 2 Chronicles iii., 17, for the Second; and Amos v., 25, 26, and 2 Chronicles vi., for the Third. It is, however, "adds Oliver", a matter of little importance provided the passage corresponds with the structure of any part of the degree."

Generally speaking, in Scottish Lodges the Scriptures are opened at Psalm cxxxiii., Amos vii., 7,8, and Ecclesiastes xii. In the First, Second and Third Degree respectively. An inquirer in "Miscellanea Latomorum" (Vol I., p.98) asked why this WAS the general practice in Scotland, and received an answer in the following terms (Vol I., p. 136). "A perusal of the passages of Scripture referred to should at once indicate their bearing on the several Degrees. The First Degree is that of Hewer, the Second Degree is that of the Builder to whom a plumb-line is essential, and the Third Degree is that of the Architect. The Psalm referred to is in praise of BROTHERLY LOVE. The passage from Ecclesiastes is a dignified REFLECTION ON THE SUBJECT OF DEATH. It is much more appropriate than Hamlet's soliloquy on the skull which some Lodges introduce." This explanation is fairly ingenious, but I fear it will not satisfy everybody.

The actual position of the Square and Compasses when resting upon the V.S.L. has been a much debated point. Some argue that the limbs of the Square should extend towards the W... because the brethren are obligated "within" it, while others maintain that the limbs should lie towards the E... as the square is dedicated to the R.W.M. Equally diverse views are held with regard to the Compasses, some brethren arguing that the limbs should extend to the E... to signify that the R.W.M. should keep within the compass of his authority, while others assert that, as the Compasses are dedicated to the Craft, the limbs should lie towards the W... since the brethren are enjoined to keep themselves within its points. Those who stand for the position that the limbs should lie towards the E... add the plausible argument that in this position they lie conveniently to the hand of the brother who is taught in the Third Degree that he is now at liberty to use the Compasses to make the circle of his Masonic duty complete. Even the question of which point should be disclosed in the Second Degree has been debated. Those who say that the points should extend towards the E... favour the view that the limb which lies towards the R.W.M.'s right should be uncovered, while those who favour a Westward position say that the point to be revealed is that which lies towards the Candidate's n..., l... b... He would be a bold man who would seek to decide when Masonic authorities differ. Even Grand Lodge hesitates to give rulings on points that are not essential, and I presume that the V.S.L. will continue to be opened at such passages, and Square and Compasses placed in such positions as local custom or the choice of individual Masters may determine.

While the Catechisms set forth that the Furniture of the Lodge consists of the V.S.L., the Square and the Compasses, and while these are the essentials there are many other things that custom and authority prescribe. The Charter or Warrant from the Grand Lodge must be exhibited; the lesser lights must be in position when required; the Rough Ashlar should rest in front of the J.W.'s pedestal, and the Smooth Ashlar in front of that of the S.W. The working-tools necessary in the various degrees should lie conveniently near; and in the Third Degree the emblems of mortality should be properly disposed.

And while all these are emblems instinct with meaning upon which the Freemason may moralise, he must never forget that the most precious jewels, and the richest furniture that a Lodge may contain are brethren with heart large with love for their follow-men. That Craftsman has looked to little purpose upon the rough ashlar who has not a kindly word for a brother in distress; and the smooth ashlar has had no meaning for him if he has remained insensible to the advantages of culture and refinement. Above all, the Three Great Lights have shone for him in vain if they have not impressed him with the sacredness of duty and deepened his reverence for the things that are eternal and unseen.