

The Ashlars

Author Unknown

We are told that the Ashlars lie open in the lodge for the brethren to moralize on. Did you ever see a brother contemplating the Ashlars and trying to derive some moral benefit from them? For the most part they are quickly referred to and just as quickly forgotten.

The Ashlar is the freestone as it comes from the quarry. The Rough Ashlar is the stone in its rude and natural state and is emblematic of man in his natural state - ignorant, uncultivated and vicious. But when education has exerted its wholesome influence in expanding his intellect, restraining his passions and purifying his life, he then is represented by the Perfect Ashlar which, under the skillful hands of workman, has been smoothed and squared and fitted for its place in the building.

However, you will observe that the Rough Ashlar in a Masonic Lodge is not in its rude or natural state. It has been squared in a fashion, partially smoothed and has apparent strength and solidarity. It possesses all the qualities that could make it a perfect stone for use in the construction of the Temple, but it needs the hands and skill of the perfect Craftsman to bring about that result.

It represents the candidate for membership in a Masonic Lodge. Such an applicant is not in his rude or natural state, neither ignorant, uncultivated or vicious. Masonry does not accept men of such qualifications. The applicant by education and perseverance has fitted himself as a respectable man in his community, assuming full responsibility as a citizen, a churchman and a member of his family. There is a vast number of men in every community possessing such qualifications who are not members of a Masonic Lodge, and may never have the desire to associate themselves with the Ancient Craft.

A man judges Masonry by the actions and manner of living of those he knows are members of the Order, but knows little or nothing of its teachings or objectives in the building of character. In that sense, he is in the crude state of the rough ashlar, possessing all the qualities or perfect material, but lacking the polish that comes from a continued study and practice of the great teachings of Masonry.

Membership in a lodge does not make a man a Mason. He must apply his abilities to improving all in him that falls short of that high standard set by Masonry in character and citizen building. If he is

satisfied with being a Master Mason in name only, he loses the benefits of further advancement and improvement offered by membership in the Order. In other words, he falls far short of anything that might be termed the Perfect Ashlar.

The Perfect Ashlar is for the more expert Craftsman to try and adjust his jewels on. In ancient times, with crude tools that would not even be used in this age, workmen of great skill and experience produced material for the construction of the Temple having such perfection that each piece fitted perfectly into its place without adjustment or correction. Time was not one of the essential factors; perfection was the goal.

To keep this state of perfection in absolute balance, a standard must have been set whereby the workmen could constantly test their tools to know that continued wear and use had not changed the measurements; even in the slightest degree. Did they have a Perfect Ashlar on which to make such a test?

We are told that the Perfect Ashlar is for the more expert workmen to "try" and adjust their tools on. In Masonry, we are the workmen, whether we be active or inactive, workers or drones. What are our "jewels", our most prized possession? If we have absorbed any of the teachings Masonry, the building of character and a Christian way of life are two of the many jewels that should constantly be before us. And in the building of that state of perfection to which we attain, what Perfect Ashlar have we that we might go to and "try" the tools with which we have been working, to know that they are still of fine quality and in perfect condition for the job that lies before us.

In every Masonic Lodge there rests on the Altar in the centre of the room the V.O.T.S.L. It is the solid foundation upon which Masonry in our lives is built. It never changes. Civilizations may come and go, but the Book of Books remains the same, adaptable to all conditions and manner of men, in good times and bad, in peace or war, a guide for mankind.

How often do we consult this Guide to try and adjust the jewels which are ours and which may need to be altered to get them back to that state of perfection which we as Masons should endeavor at all times to hold as our standard way of life?

I am afraid that in this busy world of today, we neglect this practice. Therefore, as we think of the Ashlars and try to do a little moralizing, let us forget, even for a brief period, the material things in our lives, and direct our thoughts to the more important duty of contemplating our own defects and shortcomings, and adjusting our

way of life and bringing it more in harmony with that standard given us by the Great Creator in the V.O.T.S.L.

The Ashlars are not just two pieces of stone. They represent what we have been and what we hope to be. It is up to each individual Mason to pass his own judgment on himself and to adjust his jewels accordingly, so that when the time comes and he lays down his tools and makes the final journey to the Grand Lodge Above, he may leave behind a reputation as a wise counsellor, a pillar of strength and stability, a Perfect Ashlar on which younger Masons may test the correctness and value of their own contribution to the Masonic order.

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The Plumb Rule

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The jewels of the three principal officers of a Lodge are also the working tools of the fellowcraft degree. They are the: PLUMB, LEVEL, and SQUARE. Why are these jewels given these distinctions? There are two basic reasons: First, in earlier times, the fellowcraft was the ultimate degree. There was no Master Mason degree. The fellowcraft was the Journeyman of today. The working tools of a fellowcraft were the tools of a master craftsman or journeyman. When the master mason degree was instituted, other working tools were selected to fulfill the ritual requirements. Secondly, while masonry makes use of many esteemed working tools, (ie: Gavel, 24" gauge, trowel, skirret, chisel, pencil, setting maul, etc..) it is the square, level and the plumb which are the fundamental tools that are absolutely necessary to erect any edifice be it physical or spiritual.

The plumb or plumb rule is an instrument of antiquity. The earliest craftsmen used a weighted cord as a plumb. The Greeks of yore formed a bob of lead on a cord and they gave it a name: MOLUBDOS, meaning lead. From this working tool evolved the name MOLYBDENUM, the name of a well known metal. The ever practical Romans took the word and latinized it to become PLUMBUM, the tool to measure perpendiculars of structures, walls, aqueducts, and fortifications in every corner of the roman empire. The Gauls adopted the tool, and their successors, the Normans, shortened the word to PLOMB. The Britons added the letter "a" to coin a new word: APLOMB, meaning not easily upset -- not off center. Later, Englishmen revised the spelling to PLUMB and it became a verb as well as a noun. Early English mariners used this

tool. Shakespeare called it a plummet: "Deeper than ere a plummet sounded."

It was the French who began to call the lead bob a ball. In French BOULE, meaning a ball of lead small leaden balls or boules were the primitive BULLETS. The Latins modified the word to BULLA. They used very small bullas which they compressed into a thin wafer, utilizing it as a legal seal for documents. Thus was born the Papal BULL -- it is definitely not of bovine origins!

While originally a simple lead weight on a string, the plumb, when required by expert craftsmen, evolved into the shape of the Junior Wardents jewel, and specifically adapted for operative stonemasons. It is interesting to note that this jewel or tool is sometimes found to be richly embellished with symbols (sun, moon, all-seeing eye, etc.) and at other times very plain.

Reference to the plumb arises throughout masonic rituals and books and throughout the lore of masonic catch-questions: Examples:

Ques: How long have you been a mason?

Ans: Ever since I was raised from a dead level to a living perpendicular on the squares by the hand of a friend, whom later I found to be a brother.

If you were to visit an American York Rite lodges you will find that in the FC degree the VSL is opened on the book of Amos; and it contains an excellent example of the beauty of the plumb: "Behold, the Lord stood upon a wall, with a plumb line in his hand. He said: "Amos, what seest thou?" Amos replied, "A plumb line." The Lord said, "Behold, I will set a plumb line amidst my people Israel, and I will pass by them nevermore."

To the operative masons, the level and plumb were intertwined, and together they formed a square. Brethren, the plumb rule is an instrument used in architecture by which a building is raised in a perpendicular direction; and it is figurative of an upright and true course of life. It typifies care against any deviation from the masonic upright line of conduct! If you apply the square to the level, you get the PLUMB -- the living perpendicular esteemed by all true craftsmen, and the emblem of growth and immortality. It is a truly magnificent jewel, an indispensable working tool; and when applied to the work with its fellows, the square and the level, it opens the doorway of that middle chamber in those immortal mansions, whence all goodness emanates.

The best logician is our God,
Whom the conclusion never fails;

He speaks - it is; He wills -- it stands;
He blows -- it falls; He breathes -- it lives;
His words are true -- e'en without proof,
His counsel rules without command,
Therefore can none foresee his end -
Unless on God is built his hope.
And if we here below would learn
By Compass, Needles Square and Plumb,
We never must o'erlook the mete
Wherewith our God hath measur'd us.

*Poem: by J.V.A. Andreae, a German and printed in 1623.
Translated into English by:- F.F. Schnitger and G.W. Speth*

Brethren, I give to you one last reference, from Isaiah XXV, 16-17:

"Therefore thus saith the Lord God, Behold, I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tried stone, a precious corner stone, a sure foundation: he that believeth shall not make haste. Judgment also will I lay to the line; and rightness to the plummet.

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