

THE MASON S APRON

by

William Harvey, J.P.

Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland;
Ex-Pres Dundee and District R.W.M.s and P.M.s Assn.;
Provincial Grand Bard of Forfarshire; M.M. Stirling Royal
Arch, No. 76; Hon. Mem. Caledonian Dundee, No. 254; R.W.M.
Progress Dundee, No. 967, 1914-1916; Charter Mem. Dundee St
Mary No. 1149; P.W. Sub. M. Ubique, Dundee, No. 1192;
Hon Mem, No. 6, R.A.; Hon. Mem. No. 416 R.A.; Founder
and First Principal No. 421 R.A.; Hon. Mem. No. 423 R.A.;
Founder No. 449 R.A.

Dundee:
T.M. Sparks, Crosswell Works

1921

PREFACE

The Masonic Apron, as the badge common to all the brotherhood, has much to inspire reflection, and in the following pages I have brought together one or two thoughts upon the subject in the hope that they may be of use to members of the Craft.

William Harvey

4 Gowrie Street
Dundee

THE MASON S APRON

Probably the earliest moment at which a candidate for Freemasonry recognises that he is really and truly a brother of the Craft is when the W.S.W. approaches him and in the name of the G.A.O.T.U., and by command of the R.W.M. invests him with the distinguishing badge of a Freemason. Whatever other information as to the Fraternity he may have gleaned from the outer world, he has certainly learned that Freemasons clothe themselves with aprons, and now when one of these articles of attire is girt about his waist he must realise that he is really within the pale of the brotherhood. The charge that follows the investiture whether it be the simple dignified little address that reads like a passage from Holy Writ or the more elaborate appeal which draws its colour from the honours of Masonry and the jewels of the Eastern potentate cannot fail to impress him with the fact that the Fraternity looks upon the apron as a badge neither to be lightly conferred nor to be worn with indifference.

As the apron is common to all the Degrees so it may be said with perfect truth that it is the most comprehensive symbol of our faith as well as the clearest evidence of our long descent. In a very material way it links us to those operative masons with whom we claim the closest kinship, and to whom we look as our immediate ancestors, but when it is invested with the attributes of innocence and purity it connects us in a community of thought and aspiration with the followers of every religion and the expounders of every moral system that has sought to elevate mankind.

The initiate is told that the badge is more ancient than the Golden Fleece or the Roman Eagle. Indeed, it is probably the oldest article of clothing in the world, and there is general agreement in the view that it was devised to preserve just that purity and innocence of which the Freemason regards as an emblem. Our first parents in their earliest act of self-conscious pride wove fig leaves together to cover their nakedness, and this desire to veil the organs of creation is found as a natural instinct even among savage races. The grass skirt of the South Sea Islanders, the body cloths of the natives of India and Africa, and the conventional attire of civilised peoples may all be traced to this one primal instinct that it is good that a sense of innocence should be preserved.

It may have been just because of this moral significance that the apron was imported into religion and became one of the vestments of the priesthood. It is found as an article of the accepted dress of the priests of the Jewish faith, as well as of the officials of many other religions. The suggestion has been made that the apron is allied to the girdle of the prophets the girdle of Elijah in the Old Testament, and the girdle of John the Baptist in the New. Both of these were of leather while it is also recorded that, on one occasion, Isaiah wore a girdle of hair-cloth, and that, on another occasion, Jeremiah donned one of linen. And it may have been that the priests borrowed the idea from the garments of the gods. Dr. Albert G. Mackey tells us in his *Lexicon of Freemasonry* that all the ancient statues of the heathen gods which have been unearthed in Greece, and Asia, and America are decorated with superb aprons.

If the Masonic apron is derived from early ecclesiastical clothing so also is its prevailing colour. We read in the Book of Revelation that white is an emblem of purity and thus has it been esteemed in all ages. The Arch-Druid clothed himself in white ere he cut the sacred mistletoe; the priest of the Roman gods wore a vestment of white during the hour of sacrifice, and the

priests of the Hebrew people wore ephods of white while engaged in the service of the sanctuary. These varying faiths met on the one common ground of making the white garment a symbol of the need that men should be pure in heart if they would enter into the presence of God.

Those Masonic students who like to trace all our Speculative system to the work of our Operative brethren say that as the Craftsman wore an apron to save his clothing from being soiled at work, so the Speculative brother dons it as a symbol of his desire to be kept unspotted from the world. But it has a longer lineage and a closer affinity with moral and spiritual purity than anything that can be drawn from the leather apron of the humble worker with mallet and chisel. Down through the ages a white garment has been the distinguishing feature of initiation. In the mysteries of Mithras in Persia the candidate was invested with a white apron, as he also was in certain Japanese initiations. The garment of initiation in Greece was of the same hue, because, says Cicero, white is a colour most acceptable to the gods. As an emblem of holiness, the Essenians arrayed their postulant in a white robe which was bordered with a fringe of blue ribbon, and it may be a survival of this border that we have in the blue binding of some of our working aprons. If we pass from heathen to Christian practice we find the same colour in evidence. It was customary in the primitive Christian Church for baptised converts to be impressively clothed with a white garment, and in that vision of the Grand Lodge above vouchsafed to the Apostle John at Patmos, we are told that there was a great multitude, which no man could number, out of every nation, and of all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, arrayed in white aprons.

I have said the apron is the most comprehensive symbol of our faith, and if, on the one hand it is derived from the garment which the Divine Creator bestowed upon fallen man in Eden, and on the other is an emblem of the robes of Paradise that have been washed and made white in the blood of the Lamb, then surely it is the fitting badge of the whole human race in their age-long march from darkness unto light!

And as that march of the whole creation is epitomised in the life of every individual it is fitting that the apron should be presented to the young Mason in the First Degree since his admission into the Craft in a state of helpless indigence is an emblematical representation of the entrance of all men on their mortal existence.

The Masonic Apron worn by the Initiate like everything else in our elaborate ceremonial, must conform to certain standards. It should be of pure white lambskin from fourteen to sixteen inches wide, and from twelve to fourteen inches deep with either a semi-circular or a triangular flap which falls to about four inches at its greatest depth. Often it is embellished with the name and number of the Lodge, but it should be without ornament of any kind. The young Mason, accepting the plain undecorated apron as his chart, may trace upon it his upward career in the craft. When he reaches the Second Degree he may embellish it with two rosettes at the bottom, and when he becomes a Master Mason he may add a third rosette, line and edge it with silk of that colour adopted by his Lodge, and further adorn it by adding tassels. The origin of tassels and rosettes has given rise to considerable discussion. It has been suggested that the tassels have been evolved from the two long ribbons by which early aprons were girt about the body. These ribbons passed round the waist and were tied under the flap, with the ends pendant in front. The

ends were ornamented with a silver fringe, and had become so characteristic that, when the strap and buckle arrangement was devised, they were retained, being gathered up into the form of tassels and placed one on either side. No satisfactory explanation of the origin of rosettes has been furnished. One theory is that they represent the point within the circle with which all Freemasons are familiar, but it is not generally accepted. Other details, always in the way of more elaborate decoration, are added according to the taste of the wearer. Sometimes the rosette bears a five-pointed star in relief. Occasionally the flap is embellished with the compasses and square and the sacred symbol in the centre. Now and again we find it ornamented with the Sun, the Moon, the Seven Stars, and the All-Seeing Eye. There does not appear to be any limit to the scheme of decoration which a brother may adopt so long as he confines himself to purely Masonic symbols. Office, of course, carried with it, its own ornaments. The apron of every office-bearer should display the particular jewel of his office; and in the case of a R.W.M. or P.M. the two rosettes at the bottom are replaced with levels of inverted Taus while the rosette on the flap gives way to the compasses and square enclosing the Sun and resting upon the segment of a circle, all which denote the rank of the brother.

But, no matter what the decoration or the rank it denotes every brother even the Grand Master upon whose honoured shoulders rests the purple of the fraternity must bear in mind that no adornment can add anything to the moral grandeur of the symbol, and that the badge of a Mason is found not in fine gold nor in silken fabric, but in the pure and spotless surface of the lambskin which is the common mark as it should be the common object of veneration of every member of our ancient and honourable fraternity.

The thoughtful Freemason who lingers over the charge which is addressed to him at his investiture cannot fail to appreciate that the apron is an emblem of all that is highest and best in human life. Bro. W. Harry Rylands, in an article on *The Masonic Apron*, which he contributed to the *Transactions of the Lodge Quatuor Coronati*, says that he has found nothing which would lead him to believe that much of the symbolism of the Freemason's apron which is commonly received at the present time is of very early date. He inclines to the view that it may have come in when the newer symbolism was introduced as otherwise it would be difficult to account for so many aprons being made of silk, velvet, satin, cloth, canvas and even chamois-leather, which he suggests, with a touch of subtle humour, might be called *the skin of the goat!* But while lambskin and the moral teaching deduced therefrom may belong to modern Freemasonry, Dr. Oliver tells us that in ancient days the apron or girdle of whatever material composed was universally received as a symbol of Truth and all nations have ever regarded Truth as serenely throned upon a mountain high above the strife and turmoil of men and the warrings of races. Locke, the author of *The Human Understanding*, writing to Anthony Collins, says, *to love truth for truth's sake is the principal part of human perfection in this world, and the seed-plot of all other virtues.* We are told that the Apron is the badge of Innocence and the bond of Friendship. What is Innocence but the kindly smile on the face of Truth? And there cannot be any Friendship worthy of the name either between men or between nations that has not Truth as its one and only foundation. Friendship based upon anything else is but an Apple of Sodom fair to look upon and false when put to the test.

In addition to being the badge of Innocence and the bond of Friendship, the apron is an ever-present reminder of that purity of life and action which should at all times characterise a Freemason. The outer world, because it does not know us, regards us with rather dubious eyes. We are constantly wrapt about with an air of mystery and occasionally invested with an unworthy tradition; and if we were to seek to persuade the uninitiated that our mission was the uplifting of humanity they might smile in derision, and point a mocking finger. These things need not cause us to blush for the badge we don, nor deter us from our work in raising the Temple of character. Our legends tell us that the Master Architect was slain by men who could not appreciate the value of Truth and Honour, and the greatest Builder the world has ever seen was crucified at the behest of a mob who were blind to His great purpose. But the presence of three unworthy workmen at the Temple detracts in no way from the grandeur of the House which Solomon raised to Jehovah; just as the treachery of Judas, the denial of Peter, of the desertion of John in the Galilean drama dims not the glory of the sacrifice on Calvary. So if, in building the great temple of brotherhood, we meet with Masons who are not always true to their great ideals, that is no reflection upon the work to which we are called and no justification for the sneer and contempt with which many people, in their ignorance, regard Freemasonry. At the same time it is obvious that, if we would be true to the emblem which is our earliest tangible possession as Craftsmen, we must convince the world by exemplary conduct that merit is our title to the privileges we enjoy.

The Apron has inspired many, more or less indifferent poets to sing its praises, and, generally speaking, the effusions, like almost all Masonic verse, have hardly been worth the paper upon which they were printed. I came across some stanzas the other day entitled, The White Leather Apron, and while the poem as a whole was neither better nor worse than the generality of such things, I thought there was one quatrain that struck a rather inspiring note. After dwelling upon the fact that the badge was more ancient than the Golden Fleece and more powerful than the Field-Marshal's baton, the poet proceeded:--

Tis the shield of the orphan, the emblem of love,
Tis the charter of faith from the Grand Lodge above;
While the high and the low, in its witness arrayed,
Of one blood and one kin by its magic is made.

When first invested with it we are conjured to let its pure and spotless surface be to us an ever-present reminder of rectitude of life and purity of conduct; and a never failing argument for higher thoughts, nobler deeds, and greater achievements. What is all this but an appeal to the best that is in us to make this world a better place for ourselves and our fellow-men? The Freemason knows no party in politics nor does he confess any creed in religion, for, in theory as a member of a community, and in practice as an individual, he is willing to avail himself of whatever he can find in any party, and in every faith that tends to the uplifting of humanity. He takes the Temple of King Solomon as a symbol of that Temple of Ideals to the building of which he is called, but he does so only because he is a member of a brotherhood that has sought to give concrete form to its intangible design. Others are engaged in building the same Temple and are working with the same materials, for the stones are Truth, Honour, Friendship, and Purity, and the cement is Peace, Harmony, and Brotherly Love. It may be said, therefore, that all men are

builders in a common cause, and yet in a very special sense the work is individual. In the erection of the Temple of Character it is not what other men do that counts. Other men may lay their courses well and truly but their work will reflect no credit upon us when the Master Architect comes to compare what we have done with what we were given to do. And it is just here that Freemasonry as an institution discharges its great function. By wealth of symbol and illustration it seeks to guide and direct its members in the paths of virtue and science, ever teaching them that the greatest happiness is found in doing good. Any good deed that I can do, wrote someone who would not have dishonoured Freemasonry, or any kindness that I can show, let me do it now: let me not defer it or neglect it, for I shall not pass this way again.

Ant that is the thought that should be in the mind of every brother who would prove himself worthy to wear the badge that is consecrated to goodness and virtue by centuries of usage. He has worn the Apron in vain who has not learned that our ancient Fraternity exists to shed the light of love upon this darksome world. In the Third Degree we are taught that a day will come when the apron will be put off never again to be worn on this side of eternity, and as there will be no building to be done by us when it is laid to rest beneath the silent clods of the valley,; it should be a constant reminder to us of the truth of the lines of Burns, our immortal bard and brother:--

A few days may a few years must --
Repose us in the silent dust:
The voice of Nature loudly cries,
and many a message from the skies.
That something is us never dies;
That on this frail, uncertain state
Hang matters of eternal weight;
That future life in worlds unknown
Must take its hue from this alone;
Let us th important Now employ,
And live as those who never die.

====
1997-02-02