

THE NORTHEAST CORNER

Surely no Mason ever forgets the moment when he is placed in the Northeast Corner of the Lodge, and hears the Master say, that he there stands a just and upright Mason. It is one of the thrills along the great journey of initiation, a point at which the idea and purpose of Masonry begin to take shape in the mind.

A thrill of joy is felt in the Lodge, not only by the initiate but by the Master and the Brethren, as if a son had been born, or a new friend found; a note of exaltation on having arrived at so happy a climax, as when a pilgrim pauses to rejoice in so much of a journey done. And naturally so, because the Corner Stone of a Mason's life has been laid.

Always, as far back as we can go in the story of mankind, the laying of a Cornerstone has been a happy event. It has always been celebrated with solemn and joyous rites. It is the basis of a new building, the beginning of a new enterprise; and the good will of God is invoked to bless the builders and the building.

How much more, then, should it be so when a man takes the first step out of Darkness toward the Light, and begins the adventure of a new life! More important by far than Temple or Cathedral is the building of a moral character and a spiritual personality. Stones will rot and Temples crumble under the attrition of time, but moral qualities and spiritual values belong to the Eternal Life.

The initiate stands in the Northeast Corner on a foundation of Justice, the one virtue by which alone a man can live with himself or with his fellows. Without it no structure will stand, in architecture, as Ruskin taught us, much less in morals. In the Rite of Destitution he has learned to love Mercy, and at the Altar of Obligation prayer has been offered, in fulfillment of the words of the prophet:

"He hath Shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love Mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God!"

In the Northeast Corner the initiate stands midway between the North, the place of darkness, and the East, the place of Light, whence healing, revealing rays fall upon the life of man. Such is his position, symbolically, and rightly so. He is an Entered Apprentice, a beginner in the Masonic Art, neither in the Dark nor in the Light. He has come out of the Darkness, his face set toward the Light, and his quest is for more Light, with yet much light to dawn upon him. What is life for? To live, of course; and only by living it do we learn what it is for, much less how live it. It is ever an adventure, a new adventure for each man, despite the millions that have lived before us, since, as Keats said about poets, "We Never Really Understand Fine Things Until We Have Gone The Same Steps As The Author." Only by living can we learn what life is, verifying the wisdom of ages alike by our virtues and our vices.

Yet it means much to have the wisdom learned by ages of living taught us in symbols and told us in a story, as it is taught us and told us in a Masonic Lodge. It brings to us the truth tried by time and

tragedy, and the principles wrought out and discovered by the race in its long experience. It gives us a plan, a picture, a prophecy, and the fellowship of men going the same road.

The initiate stands Erect in the Northeast Corner, upright and ready to receive his working tools, a son of the Light, himself a living stone to be polished. What is more wonderful, what more beautiful, than Youth standing erect before God - not cringing, not groveling - seeking the Light by which to make its way through the dim country of this world to the City that hath foundations! Truly, our Masonry is the organized poetry of faith!

But why the Northeast Corner? Would not some other corner of the Lodge do as well? Perhaps it would, but Masonry is very old, going back into a time far gone, when ordinary things had meanings, real or imaginary, beyond their practical use. Such a question opens a window into things quaint, curious, and even awful; and all sorts of explanations are offered us, some of which may be named.

For example, Albert Pike spread out the map of the old world of the East - the mystical territory whence so many of our symbols and legends have come - and found that "The Apprentice represents the Aryan race in its original home on the highlands of Pamir, in the north of that Asia termed Orient, at the angle whence, upon two great lines of emigration South and West, they flowed forth in successive waves to conquer and colonize the world."

Well, what of it, interesting though it may be as a fact of long ago, if a fact it is? What truth can it teach us to our profit, beyond the suggestion that the House of Initiation took the form of the world as it was then mapped in the mind, and that the procession of initiation follows the line of march of a conquering race? It may be valuable, as preserving the dim outline of ancient history - but not otherwise.

Another student, seeking the secret of Masonry in solar symbolism and mythology, looks at the same map of the Eastern World, in the frame of an Oblong Square, studying the movements of the Sun from season to season. He finds that the point farthest North and the point farthest South on the map mark the Summer and Winter Solstices, respectively. In other words, the Northeast Corner of the World, as then mapped, is the point in the annual course of the Sun when it reaches the extreme northern limit; the longest day in the year, which in Masonry we dedicate to St. John the Baptist, the Prophet of righteousness.

Then, turning to the history of religion, he finds, not unnaturally, many rites of primitive peoples - magical rituals and Midsummer Night Dreams - celebrating the Summer Solstice. Many hints and relics of the old Light Religion are preserved for us in Masonry - rays of its faiths and fictions - one of them being that the Northeast Corner of the Universe, and so of the Lodge of which it is a symbol, is the seat of the Sun-God in the prime of his power.

So, too, the Northeast Corner, as the throne of God in hour of his majesty, became a place unique in the symbols of man, having special virtue and sanctity. As we read in the Institutes of Menu: "If he has any incurable disease, let him advance in a straight path towards the invincible northeast point, feeding on water and air till his mortal frame totally decays, and his soul becomes united with the Supreme." What more appropriate a place from which to start an edifice, or to place an Apprentice as he begins to build the Temple of his Masonic life?

Also, because of such magical ideas associated with the Northeast Corner, it was a cruel custom for ages to bury a living human being under the corner stone of a building, to mollify the Gods, and, later, as a token of the sacrifice involved in all building. Horrible as the custom was, here no doubt was a crude sense of the law of sacrifice running through all human life, never to be escaped, even by the loftiest souls, as we see on a dark cross outside the city gate.

In the crude ages all things were crude; even the holiest insights took awful shapes of human sacrifice. Life is costly, and man has paid a heavy price for the highest truth. For there is a law of heavenly death by which man advances - the death, that is, of all that is unheavenly within him - that the purer, clearer truth may rise. Evermore, by a law of dying into life, man grows - dying to his lower, lesser self and releasing the angel hidden within him. Thinking of all these strands of thought and faith and sorrow woven into the symbolism of the Lodge, how can any one watch without emotion as the Apprentice takes his place, upright and eager, in the Northeast Corner. There he stands, against a background of myth, symbol and old sacrifice, erect before God, and one thinks of the great words in the Book of Ezekiel:

"And God said unto me, Son of Man, stand upon thy feet, and I will speak unto thee. And the spirit entered into me when he spake unto me, and set me upon my feet, that I heard him that spake unto me." Such is the challenge of God to the manhood of man, asking him to stand erect and unafraid, and commune as friend to friend. Alas, it is not easy to keep the upright posture, physically or morally, in the midst of the years with their blows and burdens. At last, a dark Ruffian lays us low in death, and only the Hand of God, with its strong grip, can lift us from a dead level and set us on our feet forever. So, at least, Masonry teaches us to believe and live:

Lord, I believe Man is no little thing that, like a bird in spring, Comes fluttering to the Light of Life, And out of the darkness of long death. The breath of God is in him, And his age long strife With evil has a meaning and an end. Though twilight dim his vision be Yet can he see Thy Truth, And in the cool of evening, Thou, his friend, Dost walk with him, and talk Did not the Word take flesh? Of the great destiny That waits him and his race. In days that are to be By grace he can achieve great things, And, on the wings of strong desire, Mount upward ever, higher and higher, Until above the clouds of earth he stands, And stares God in the face.

"SO MOTE IT BE"