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By Bro. B. Salt

THE APRONS

Brethren, firstly let us dwell for a moment on the Apron which is presented to the Initiate. It is, or ought to be, a piece of plain white leather, taking precedence in our judgement of all wordly insignia, as being more honourable, as well as more ancient. We naturally think of the rich, and even gorgeous, insignia of many of the orders of chivalry and Kingly worth. We remember, also, that the Apron, which is our distinguishing badge, is what it is even without the embellishments belonging to the higher ranks of the craft. It is of plain white lambskin when first it is given to the initiate and, as such in its simplicity it is placed upon his con when, having completed a life, to which it may be great honours have come, his mortal remains are consigned to their last resting place.

As to its age, the apron was a form of covering for the body from the earliest recorded history. Our first parents used it — Genesis, Chap. 3 Verse 7: "And the eyes of them both were opened and they knew that they were naked, and sewed fig leaves together and made themselves an Apron" — and it was with garments made of skins of animals that the Lord God clothed them. Take the Biblical story either as history or as tradition, the fact of its early symbolic use is established. To us, therefore, it is the symbol of modesty, of purity, of toil and of service to others.

In further explanation of our badge, the Order of the Golden Fleece had its origin about 1429 A.D. and the Roman Eagle dates back to 105 B.C. Of illustrious orders today the greatest is the Order of the Garter. Freemasonry, however, in the very essence of its being is big and broad and all-embracing, and as such it has endeavoured to exemplify the doctrines of:

BELIEF IN THE DEITY

SERVICE TO GOD AND MAN

GRATITUDE FOR, AND VENERATION OF, HIS WORD

CHARITY TO ALL

TEMPERANCE, FORTITUDE, JUSTICE AND PRUDENCE

Whose innocence has been to do no hurt to one's fellows, but helpfully to serve them and to enjoy their companionship.

The apron is the same thing in all the degrees. The question of its varying adornment is one of custom and convention. Out-standing is the blue colour of the ribbon borders, rosettes, etc. In all church symbolism blue is the colour of hope. It is the colour which ancient artists depicted the garments of the Blessed Virgin Mother. Blue is also the colour of the Order of the Garter. Actually, both shades of blue found to be of use in the Craft are Sky Blue, and both are Garter Blue. Originally, in the Order of the Garter, light blue was used, and it was so used until the end of the Stuart Dynasty. After their deposition the Stuarts still conferred the order but the Hanoverian kings had assumed the true Kingly privilege and, to distinguish their gift they used what is known as Royal Blue. It is but a deeper Sky Blue. The Grand Lodge of Scotland uses green in the Grand Lodge regalia, because of the colour of the Order of the Thistle. This ancient order corresponds in Scotland to the Order of the Garter in England and its colour has always been green, it is believed because of the colour of the leaf of the thistle.

The custom of adorning the Apron arose apparently in the 18th Century and, once it was started, the makers of regalia endeavoured to use every bit of available space. About 1813, however, the date of the Union of the two Grand Lodges in England, the designs and colours were fixed by the United Grand Lodge of England to more simple styles.

We now have the square apron with the triangle flap. The Grand Lodge of Scotland adopted the semi-circular flap. Also, the Grand Lodge of Scotland left the colour of the craft lodge aprons to the discretion of the individual lodges. Therefore it was that some of them took special colours, and some a tartan.

The Masonic teachings of the blue ribband as the bordering of the Apron may well have come from the custom of the Ancient Israelites, as set forth in the Book of Numbers: Chapter 15 Verses 38-40, where we read: "That they put upon the fringe of the borders a ribband of blue. That ye may look upon it and remember all the Commandments of the Lord, and do them. That ye may be holy unto God."

The tassels on the Apron give the opportunity for very interesting research. They carry us back to the old operative days when the Apron was the entire skin of an animal. The skin so used was large enough to protect the wearer and his clothes from the dust and dirt inseparable from his toil. The skin of the neck of the animal was turned up towards the upper chest of the workman, while that of the forelegs formed thongs to tie the Apron round the back. The remainder of the skin gave protection to the body. It was an easy modification of the thongs to lengthen them by added pieces so that they could be crossed at the back and brought round again to be tied at the front. The ends left hanging down were then decorated with tassels or other similar ornaments. The tassels themselves were at first in the centre, but were soon moved to either side to make room for any adornment that might be put in the centre. Substitute now, for the leather thongs those of chain and braid, as now found on a decorative Apron, then reduce and modify the size of the Apron for evening wear, and we come down to our Lodge Apron in its shape today.

These explanations of its origin do not hinder us from treating the present day Apron as a symbol from which to teach many Masonic ideas. Both its historic value and its present day material and shape have been so used by its teachers. Some of these teachers have expounded the fantastic. This we must avoid, but we must with equal care search for and set out both the useful and the beautiful. As we have dealt with some of the history and general appearance of the Apron, let us now turn to its particular parts:

The tassels should have seven strings. These represent the seven liberal arts and science, namely: Grammar, Rhetoric, Logic, Arithmetic, Geometry, Music and Astronomy. They are symbolic also of the Seven that are essential to the perfection of a Lodge, and of many other ideas surrounding the teaching of the "Perfect Number".

The explanation of the Rosettes is a little difficult. Indeed, only theories seem to exist as to their

origin and their present day worth. Their present day value, however, is undoubted. They indicate the Apprentice, the Fellow Craft and the Master Mason. Some of the older lodges have one rosette on the flap of the Apprentice Apron.

The three Taus of the installed Master are most interesting. In oldest Hebrew character the Tau was the letter of the alphabet of similar value to our "T". Its shape in modern Hebrew is different, but originally it was a true cross as is our T of today. It was always a symbol of the cross and, as such, was used by Moses as a sign on the forehead when he consecrated Aaron to the high priesthood. In Ezekiel, also, it is given as the sign to be placed on the forehead to those who were to be saved from the hand of the destroying angel. Thus it is the mark of Salvation. Such was the actual teaching of the Ancient Rabbis. It was a mark of favourable distinction. That the Tau is inverted on the Apron seems to have come into use because of its similarity in shape to the level. As such it exemplified the two lines — the perpendicular and the horizontal. The perpendicular is the line of Divinity and the horizontal the line of Humankind. These two lines being as long as they can possibly be made, speak of Divinity and Humanity and when they are in perfect relation, as are lines in the square or level, all must be well.

The elaborate adornment of the Grand Master's Apron is a thing of beauty, but it is also the section of most ancient custom. We have spoken of the Apron as going back to the earliest records of our first parents. This is in accord with Divine Writ. We have also the ancient carvings on rock, and, among these, there is nothing more valuable or more beautiful than is to be found in the early Egyptian tombs. The picture records of these old tombs date back to and beyond the days of Moses. The apron was the badge of authority in Egypt and was worn by the King as head of the priesthood when performing the religious ceremonies in the temple and also as Grand Master, when assisting at the Initiatory rites in the mysteries. On such occasions it was looked upon as the distinctive regalia of his office. In the temples and tombs there are quite a number of drawings of the Grand Master's apron, all bearing solar emblems.

One of the questions I have asked, and have very frequently heard asked of others --- with very seldom an explanatory reply ---is, why are Grand Stewards' Aprons and Regalia distinctively Red? I have pursued this subject and submit the following:

From shortly after its inception the Grand Lodge of England held annual feasts. The duties attended upon the conduct of these feasts at first devolved upon the Grand Wardens. In the year 1721 the Grand Master ordered that the Grand Wardens take some stewards to assist at the approaching festival. For some reason this was not done — the office of steward was very onerous and very little sought after. There is a record, however, of six stewards being publicly thanked in the year 1723.

In 1728 it was proposed to Grand Lodge that stewards be chosen. None, however, volunteered. This plan to attract volunteers, if plan it was, was later successful for twelve brethren offered their services. In the years that ensued the office of steward had many privileges attached to it, so that it became not shunned but coveted. In 1729 the stewards gained from the Grand Master the privilege of themselves nominating the brethren who were to fill any vacancies that occurred in their numbers. In 1737 Grand Lodge passed resolution that those brethren that are stewards shall wear their aprons lined with red silk and their proper jewels appended by red ribbon, and that those who have served the offices of steward be at liberty to wear aprons lined with red silk and not otherwise.