

Lesser Lights

By Unknown

When an initiate is first brought into the light in a Masonic Lodge, the radiance come from the Lesser Lights, which form a triangle about the Altar. It seems, at first, rather odd that so great and important a symbol should receive such scant attention in the ritualistic body of Freemasonry.

We are instructed that they are called Lesser Lights, that they are placed in a triangle, that by their light we may see other objects, that they represent the Sun, Moon and Worshipful Master, for certain reasons which are rather briefly explained ... and that is all! Later on we learn, more by example than by precept, more by custom than by law, that Lesser Lights are always lit when a lodge is opened. Even when their flames do not really burn (have you ever stood at a grave side on a day too windy to permit the flickering candle to send forth its light?) they are constructively burning. They are supposed to be lighted as soon as the lodge is opened, and then the Altar is arranged; to be extinguished after the Altar is disarranged, and the Great Lights displaced. But nowhere in our ritual are we told much of anything as to why all these things are so; how the Lesser Lights came to be; what their hidden, covered, secret, symbolic meaning is.

And you shall search through many a Masonic volume and tome and find no more light on the Lesser Lights than the ritual gives. Mackey, the great authority, is unusually brief, and beyond drawing a parallel to the use of the seven branched candelabra as described in the Great Light, and stating that their use in Masonry is very old, they appearing in print in references to Masonry in the seventeenth century, adds practically nothing to the ritual explanations.

And yet it could not be possible that so important a symbol could have no more soul than is given in the few words we devote to it. It seems obvious that it is one of those symbols in Freemasonry ... of which there are so many! ... which the individual brother is supposed to examine and translate for himself, getting from it what he can, and enjoying what he gets in direct proportion to the amount of labor and thought he is willing to devote to the process of extracting the meaning from the outer covering.

Let us dig a bit together; labor in company is lightened always; a burden shared is a burden halved!

Immediately after the Lesser Lights are named, our attention is directed to the fact that they are in a triangle about the Altar. In some Jurisdictions they are closely about the Altar; in others, one is placed at each of the stations of the three principal officers.

In some lodges the three Lesser Lights form a right, in others an equilateral; in others an isosceles triangle. What is uniform through out the Masonic World is the triangular formation about the Altar; what is different is the shape and size of the triangle. Of course, it is not possible to place three lights to form anything else but a triangle, or a straight line; they cannot be made to form a square or a star. Which brings us to the first place in which to sink our Masonic shovel; why are there three Lesser Lights, and not two or four?

There are a number of reasons. Any thinking brother has already discovered that there is "Three" throughout the whole system of Ancient Craft Masonry; three degrees, three steps, three ancient Grand Masters; and so on. It will be no surprise to recall that three is the first of the great Sacred Numbers of the ancient Mysteries, and that it is the numerical symbol of God. Not, if you please, because God was necessarily considered triune. While many religions of many ages and peoples have conceived of Divinity as a trinity, the figure three as a symbol of God is far older than any trinitarian doctrine. It comes from the triangle, which is the first possible figure made up of straight lines which is without either beginning or ending. One line, or two lines have ends. They start and finish. The triangle, like the square or the five or more sided figure, has no loose ends. and the triangle is the first of these which can be made; as God was always considered as first; and also as without either beginning or ending, the triangle itself soon became a symbol of Deity.

Sun worship was among the first of religions; let him who knows lay down the facts as to whether sun worship preceded fire worship, or fire worship that of the sun. To us it does not matter. Sun worship is far, far older than any recorded history; it goes back, far back, into the first dim mists which obscure the very first beginnings of intelligence. So it was only natural that the early worshipers should set a light beside their Altar or Holy place and name it for the sun.

Ancient peoples made much of sex. Their two greatest impulses were self-preservation and mating. Their third was protection of children. So enormously powerful were these impulses in primal man, that not all his civilization, his luxury, his complicated and involved life, have succeeded in removing these as the principal mainsprings of all human endeavor. It was natural for the savage worshiper of a shining God in the sky to think he, too, required a mate; especially when that mate was so plainly in evidence; the moon became the Sun's bride by a process of reasoning as plain as it was childlike.

Father, Mother ... there must be a child, of course.

And that child was mercury, the nearest planet to the sun, the one the God kept closest to him. Here we have the origin of the three Lesser Lights; in earliest recorded accounts of the

Mysteries of Eleusis (to mention only one) we find three lights about the Holy Place, representing the Sun, Moon and Mercury.

Albert Pike says: "They are still the three lights of a Masonic Lodge, except that for Mercury, the Master of the Lodge has been absurdly substituted.

Albert Pike was a very great and a very learned man.

To him Freemasonry owes a debt greater, perhaps, than to any other who ever lived; he gave her study, he brought forth her poetry, he interpreted her symbols, he defined her truths, he made plain much that she had concealed. But Pike himself defended the right of Masons to study and interpret the symbols of Freemasonry for themselves. So that it is with no thought of controversy with the immortal dead that many contend that there is no absurdity in Freemasonry taking the ancient lights which symbolized the Sun, Moon and Mercury, and making them stand for the Sun, Moon and Worshipful Master of His Lodge.

For the Sun and Moon give light. While it is true that there is no real "regularity" with which the Moon "Governs" the night ... since the night gets along just as well without the Moon as with her ... she does give light when she is present. There is no question that the Sun Governs and Rules the day. And the Sun, of course lives light and life as well.

The Worshipful Master rules and governs his lodge as truly as the sun and Moon rule the day and night. There can be no lodge without a Worshipful Master; he is, in a very real sense, the lodge itself. There are some things he cannot do that the brethren, under him, can do. But, without him the brethren can do nothing, while he, without the brethren's consent or even their assistance, can do much. It is one of the principal functions of the Worshipful Master to disseminate light – Masonic Light – to his lodge. That the duty is as often honored by neglect as by performance has nothing to do with the fact that it is a duty.

So that the inclusion of a symbol of the Worshipful Master, as a giver of light, is to most of us neither fanciful nor absurd, but a logical carrying out of that Masonic doctrine which makes a Master a Giver of Light to his brethren.

The ritual instructs candidates that they behold the Great Lights of Masonry by the illumination of the Lesser Lights. This is an actual fact, but it is also a symbol. The Great Light cannot be read without light; the Square and Compasses cannot be used in the dark; and neither can be understood, nor can we make any use of them for the noble and glorious purposes taught us in Speculative Masonry, without we receive symbolic light, Masonic light from the East; that is, from the Worshipful Master, or those he delegates to bring that "Good and Wholesome Instruction" which is at once his duty and his happiness.

A lesson is taught in the references to regularity of the heavenly luminaries, as guides for the government of a lodge by the worshipful Master. The fact that the Moon is not "Regular" in her attendance upon the sun, or the night, and she does not, in any such sense as does the sun,

"govern" that period of darkness in which she appears, in no way detracts from the force of these admonitions. For these phrases are very old, and go back to a time when men knew much less of astronomy than they do today; to a time when the moon, in popular belief, had much greater powers than she actually possesses. We know the moon to have almost no effect upon the earth, as far as our lives are concerned, save as she makes the tides. Our ancient brethren believed her light to be full of weird and wonderful powers; "Moon-Struck" and "Lunatic" (from luna, the moon) are symbol words of these ancient and now exploded beliefs. Less than two hundred years ago, many crimes, misdemeanors, beneficent influences and beautiful actions were ascribed to the moon; things evil had to be done "in the dark of the moon;" witches were supposed to ride in moonlight; dogs bayed at the moon because by its light they could see what was hidden from mortal eyes; sheeted ghosts preferred moonlight to star light; incantations were never properly recited unless in the moonlight, and the moon gave or withheld crops, influenced the weather and, when eclipsed, foretold disaster.

With such a body of belief it is not surprising that the moon was considered, even by the educated, to have "governing" powers, whence, probably, her inclusion with such abilities into our ritual.

That we know better is in no sense antagonistic to our use of the old, old phrase in our ceremonies. We know better about many things. The knowledge of the art of architecture as set forth in the Middle Chamber lecture would get no one a job as office boy in a builder's office today. Our penalties, never enforced by Masons, are wholly symbolic. We have many other ways of transmitting intelligence today which are not included in a list of ways of writing and printing. But we love and repeat the old ritual because it is old; because it is a bond with those who have gone this way before us, because it is the time-tried and well-trusted way of making Masons, and we would not alter it; no, not for any modern phrases, no matter how deep in erudition they were steeped.

And so we continue to have our moon "govern" the night, and do it "regularly," too, finding in this a bond with other men of other times something dear and precious, none the less that the words portray only a fancy.

Indeed, the whole matter of the Lesser Lights is such a bond, and such a fancy. It would be far more accurate if we repeated "The Lesser Lights represent the Sun, the Earth and the Moon. As the sun, in its gravity, causes the earth to revolve around it in three-hundred and sixty-five and a fraction days, and the moon revolves about the earth in approximately twenty-eight days, so the earth is never without government and light, as all lodges should also be."