

The Symbolism and Design of the Masonic Apron

Delivered in the Lodge by WBro C.J.E. Hudspeth, PM, AMIE Australia on June 24, 1949

The Apron is not a modern invention, in fact it is the most ancient of all garments. In the 3rd Chapter of Genesis these words are written: "*and the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew they were naked, and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons.*" We are not so much interested in Adam and Eve's apron as we are in the Masonic apron. Boutelle, in his story of the building of King Solomon's Temple, says: "When the construction of King Solomon's Temple was commenced, workmen were selected to carry out the different trades. Hiram, the widow's son, proclaimed that before entering upon the undertaking the aid of God should first be invoked, and as the Temple was to be God's Holy House and erected to Him, each workman having a part in its construction should offer a sacrifice to God on the Altar of Burnt Offering. The Lamb had in all ages been deemed an Emblem of Innocence and was offered as a sacrifice. With the exception of the skin, the whole of the lamb was consumed. The skins were properly prepared and Hiram caused aprons to be made of them. One apron from the skin of each lamb sacrificed, one apron for each mason under him." When the aprons had been presented to the workmen, Hiram is reported to have said: "Masonic authority makes this, the snow-white lambskin apron, its first tangible gift to you and ordains that all Masons in all ages, wherever they may be throughout the world, shall ever receive it and always wear it." The apron is an emblem of innocence. Innocent life has gone out of the world: for every man an apron - for every apron a life.

This sacrifice is typical of a greater sacrifice promised by the Almighty and prophesied by all the Prophets of Isreal - the coming of the Messiah, who shall be offered for the guilty world. This is the badge of a Mason. It sets the Mason apart from other men. There shall be many who seek to wear it and those to whom it is given shall exalt themselves because of possessing it. No other gift that mere man can bestow can equal this honour and dignity. Kings can bestow no decorations or titles so worthy as this. The Senior Warden says: "More ancient than the Golden Fleece or Roman Eagle, more honourable than the Garter or any other Order in existence, being the Badge of Innocence and bond of friendship." The Order of the Golden Fleece was founded by Phillip the Good, Duke of Burgundy and the Netherlands on January 10th, 1430, in honour of his marriage to Isabel, daughter of King John of Portugal.

It is not definitely known why the order was named the Golden Fleece, but there are four surmises as to its origin.

(1) In memory of Jason and his exploits in Greek Legends.

(2) Because the wealth of Flanders came largely from wool.

(3) That it was so named in memory of Gideon's request that the Lord would prove his Power by causing the dew of heaven to fall only on a fleece set out in the night while the surrounding ground remained dewless. (Judges 6th Chapter. Verses 37 to 40).

(4) That it was named in honour of the Duke's own mistress because he gloried in her wondrous fleece of beautiful golden hair.

According to a Greek legend, there was a fabled ram with a golden fleece, on which the discarded wife of the King of Thessaly placed her son and daughter, bidding the ram to carry them to a place of safety far from the wrath of her successor in the King's affections. The daughter, whose name was Helle, fell into the waters of the Strait which connects the Aegean Sea with Constantinople, from which event the Strait was given the name of Hellespont - the Dardanelles of the present day. The boy kept his hold and he reached the land of Colchis on the eastern shore of the Black Sea. Here he sacrificed the ram and gave its fleece to the King of that country, who had received him hospitably. The fleece was hung up in a sacred grove and guarded day and night by a dragon that never slept.

Jason, a Grecian hero, charged with bringing back the Golden Fleece to Thessaly - as the price of a Kingdom - set out on his quest in the good ship ARGO, manned with his Argonaut crew of immortal heroes. After many thrilling

adventures he succeeded in the mission, and with a yoke of fire-breathing bulls performed the task assigned to him of ploughing under the dragon's teeth which produced a crop of warriors. These assailed him, but turned against each other when Jason sprinkled them liberally with a potent lotion prepared for him by Medea, his lady love who was, luckily, a sorceress of great power. This legend or myth is probably intended to dramatise the first Grecian expedition.

The Roman Eagle was associated with the God Jupiter in Roman Mythology. Jupiter was the lord of life and light. The most celebrated temple of Jupiter was on the Capitoline Hill in the City of Rome. The Roman represented Jupiter as seated on the throne of ivory, holding in his right hand a sheaf of thunderbolts and in his left a sceptre, whilst an eagle stands beside his throne. When about to go into battle the consuls offered sacrifice to Jupiter praying that he might lead them against the enemy and, on their return from victory, thanksgivings were offered in his name. The figure of the eagle appears on the Standards of the Roman legions and is reflected in the national ensigns of the United States of America, of France under Napoleon, of Imperial Germany and WWII Germany, Mexico and other nations. The Eagle is an emblem of might and courage amongst birds, as is the lion among beasts. Its far-seeing vision, the vast height to which it soars, the wild grandeur of its abode and its longevity have been extolled in poetic phrases by the poets of every tongue and nation. When the Roman Eagle yielded its sway over the then known world, that world sank into a night of 1000 years during which time - with few exceptions - no poet, painter, orator, statesman, inventor, or discoverer was produced; an age which ended only with the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus, accompanied by the production of gold and other wealth in sufficient quantities to stimulate the world to a new day and new era. "More Ancient." According to Bro. Howe in his book THE FREEMASONS' MANUAL, Emnolphus of Trace was initiated in the Elusinian Mysteries (in Greece) in the year 1350 B.C. He was made the first priest and it was he who instituted the lambskin as a symbol of Peace and Goodwill. Thus it will be seen that the apron is indeed "more ancient than the Golden Fleece or the Roman Eagle."

The Order of the Garter is the oldest and highest order of knighthood in the world today. Founded in the year 1348 by Edward III., King of England, a blue garter is the badge of the Order on which is displayed its motto HONI SOIT QUI MAL Y PENSE. (Evil be to whom evil thinks). A collar from which is suspended a figure of St. George, the Patron Saint of England, mounted in the act of slaying the dragon, and an eight-pointed star having a cross of four equal arms and angles in its centre, surrounded by the motto complete the Order insignia. The origin of the Order is that the King picked up a garter dropped from her ladyship, the Countess of Salisbury, at a Ball and, placing it about his own knee, said "HONI SOIT QUI MAL Y PENSE." The Order was originally composed of 25 knights, exclusive of the Sovereign, the Royal Family and foreign Princes. It was first called the Order of St. George and ladies were admitted during its first two centuries. Today England's reigning Queen and Princess Elizabeth are the only members of the fair sex carried on the list-with the title "Lady of the Garter". It is of interest to note that the Duke of Connaught, late Past Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of England, is one of the most distinguished members of the Order of the Garter.

The wearing of Badges is an ancient custom. Israelite Priests wore Girdles. Indians, Persians (Iranians) and Egyptians of advanced rank wore white robes striped and ornamented with tassels and fringes. Colour of the apron is white and has always been the colour for purity, and referred to in the Bible:- Eccles. 9. 8. "Let thy garments be always white." and in Rev. 3, 4. "They shall walk with me in white for they are worthy." Aaron the High Priest was commanded when he entered the Sanctum Sanctorum to make an expiation for the sins of the people, to appear clothed in white linen. The war-like Scandinavians presented their candidates with a white shield. Disciples of Pythagoras chanted their songs clothed in garments of white. The Egyptians decorated the head of their principal deity OSIRIS with a white tiara and the priests wore robes of the whitest linen. The word "candidate" itself is derived from the Latin word "candidus" - a white man. In Germany (as well as in the Netherlands) the candidate in the first degree receives a pair of white gloves as a symbol of purity.

The Entered Apprentice Apron. The apron is a perfect square, its four right angles teach us that Purity, Truth, Sincerity and Honesty are the foundations of morality. Its four sides remind us to practice the four cardinal virtues - Temperance in word and deed; Fortitude in a noble purpose; Prudence in judging wisely; Justice to the humblest and greatest alike. The Square (or 'four') is the symbol of matter. Four was the emblem of matter to the ancients because they thought that the earth flat, square, and marked by the four points of the compass. The flap is triangle whose three sides teach us to relieve a distressed brother. To be kind and friendly in dealing with our fellow men. The triangle is the threefold revelation for God, or Divine Wisdom. The circle formed by the strings is the symbol of Spirit. The Entered Apprentice Apron should have the flap pointing upwards, indicating that Divine Wisdom has not yet truly penetrated the gross matter of our bodies. The Equilateral

triangle made by the upper flap teaches us the threefold personal revelation of God. The triangle is the Symbol of the Deity for this reason. In geometry, a single line cannot represent a perfect figure, neither can two lines. Three lines, however, constitute the triangle, or first perfect demonstrable figure. Hence this figure symbolises the Eternal God, infinitely perfect in his nature. But the triangle properly refers to God only in his quality as an eternal Being, its three sides representing the past, present and future. This symbolism of the Eternal God by the triangle is the reason why the Trinitarian scheme has been so prevalent in all religions and in Freemasonry; the frequent recurrence of the No. 3 throughout all ritualistic symbolism, is striking evidence of this. The Greek character Delta is formed as an equilateral triangle and from the sacredness attached to the form of the triangle, this character was always known as the Sacred Delta. The Egyptians called it the Sacred No. 3, a number of perfection. It was an object of worship among them as a symbol of the Grand Principle of animated existence which extends its influences throughout all created matter the three sides representing the animal, vegetable and mineral departments of nature. To the Jews the triangle represented the three periods of existence: the past, present and future. To the Hindus: creation, preservation and renewal. To the Chinese: heaven, earth and water. The flap of the apron when raised forms a triangle standing on a square. This was considered by the Egyptians as a most perfect figure because in the Egyptian ceremony of Initiation into their mysteries, the candidate, blindfolded and with a chain around his neck, is led by a brother to a door in the wall of the temple of the lodge-the door formed a triangle symbolising Heaven and square representing the area of the entrance on which

he trod symbolised earth, thus the entrance symbolised passing from Earth to Heaven. The granite triangle in the king's chamber in the Great Pyramid is said to represent the triune God of the Egyptians.

The Fellowcraft Apron has the flap pointing down and indicates (1) That wisdom has begun to enter and therefore control matter, and (2) that the Soul and body are acting in unison. The two rosettes stress the dual nature of man and have a clear reference to the two Pillars. The two rosettes also point out that the Fellowcraft has not yet completed Freemasonry as it requires a third rosette to form a triangle. It is thought by some that the blue rosettes added to the Fellowcraft apron indicate the progress being made in the science of regeneration and that the candidate's spirituality is beginning to bud forth, also that the wilderness of the natural man is now blossoming as the rose, in the flowers and graces of his regenerated nature.

The Master Mason's Apron. The addition of the third rosette forms a triangle, pointing upwards. A triangle, point upwards, represents Fire or Divine Spark. It is the emblem of Shiva, the third member of the Hindu Trinity. It also represents spirit. The triangle of the flap and triangle of the rosettes form a square, where they overlap. This square represents matter. Thus we have the union of Body (square), Soul (top triangle) and Spirit (lower triangle). The apron was at first fastened by strings passed around the back and brought to the front, with the ends hanging down. It became the custom to decorate the ends with fringes, jewels, etc., but the introduction of elastic bands did away with that idea and the pendants were added as a sort of "in memoriam" to the departed strings. Later, the design of the **tassels** was made with a symbolic background. The tassels have seven strings which represent:

- (1) The 7 liberal Arts and Sciences-Grammar, Rhetoric (the art and science of expression), Logic, Arithmetic, Geometry, Music, Astronomy. The number 7 appears in nearly every ancient institution.
- (2) 7 or more the make a lodge perfect.
- (3) King Solomon was 7 years and upwards in building the temple to God's Service.
- (4) 7 was the perfect number of the Pythagoreans because it was composed of three and four-the sum of the points of the triangle and the square-the two perfect figures.
- (5) The 7 steps.
- (6) 7 Altars burned constantly before Mithra.
- (7) The Hindus believed the world to be surrounded by 7 peninsulas.
- (8) There are 7 spacious caverns in the Persian mysteries.
- (9) The 7 branched candlestick of the Jews representing the Sun as the central light and six other planets.
- (10) Jacob saw a ladder of 7 steps leading to heaven.

The sum of the strings in the two tassels is 14, which was the number of pieces into which the body of OSIRIS was divided by Set in the Egyptian mysteries. The blue ribbon around the apron has a deep symbolic meaning, and it will be seen that on reference to the Volume of the Sacred Law, The Book of Numbers, Chapter 15. 37th to the 41st Verse - *And the Lord spake unto Moses saying. Speak unto the Children of Israel, and bid them that they make them*

fringes in the borders of their garments, and that they put upon the fringe of the borders a riband of blue . And it shall be unto you for a fringe, that you may look upon it, and remember all the commandments of the Lord and do them; that ye seek not after your own heart and your own eyes; after which ye used to go a whoring; That ye may remember, and do my commandments, and be holy unto your God.

I am the Lord your God, which brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be your God: I am the Lord your God.

The **Blue** of the Apron is Cambridge Blue. It is closely related to the colour of the Virgin Mary, which is itself derived from the Blue of the Ancient Egyptian Goddess Isis. In 1813 the English Grand Lodge standardised the size and shape of aprons. The Blue of the apron is also the "Garter blue" of an early date. King George II changed the Garter Blue from its original colour to its present dark blue to distinguish his Garter Knights from those created by the exiled Stuarts. According to Mackay, the blue border was added - the colour of the firmament enveloping the globe - emblematic of universal friendship and benevolence, instructing us that in the mind of a Freemason these virtues should be as extensive as the vault of Heaven itself.

Standing erect, the form of the apron gives two **levels**, one at the top, one at the bottom. The lower level is laid in the earth. It is symbolical of the level of time along which we walk toward that place from which no traveller returns. The level above it is laid in the heavens - a spiritual level. It is a promise that those who walk uprightly before God and Man (which is symbolised by the two perpendiculars on either side) shall walk eternally on the spiritual level.

The **Plumbs** or sides, admonish rectitude. Rectitude of Conduct. Rectitude of Morals, Rectitude of Life. 2 Kings 21-13th Verse - *and I will stretch over Jerusalem the line of Samaria and the plummet of the house of Ahab.* Isaiah 28-17th Verse - *Judgment also will I lay to the line, and righteousness to the plummet.* Amos 7-8th Verse - *Thus he showed me, and behold the Lord stood upon a wall made by a plumbline, with a plumbline in his hand. And the Lord said unto me, Amos what seest thou? And I*

said, A plumbline. Then said the Lord, Behold I will set a plumbline in the midst of my people Israel. I will not again pass by them any more. Zachariah 4-10th Verse - *For who hath despised the day of small things? For they shall rejoice, and shall see the plummet in the hand of Zerrubabel with those even, they are the eyes of the Lord, which run to and fro through the whole earth.* Which means that God has been lenient with his people in the past but without avail, he now proposes to set up in their midst a test of uprightness - a plumb line - and if his people failed to measure up to it, He would no more ignore their shortcomings but would rigourously punish them. Let none fail to walk uprightly. God and Man watch him. God and Man shall witness for him in another day.

There are four **squares** upon the Apron - one in each corner. The square leads a man from below to above, from the earthly level to the spiritual level. We should always live up to the Law of the Square-which is found in the Bible. Matthew 22-37, Mark 12-30, Luke 10-27: *"And thou shall love the Lord thy God, with all thy heart, and with thy soul and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength."* This is the first commandment, and the second, thus *"Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself"*. There are no greater commandments than these. Laboriously lay levels, perseveringly erect plumbs, but with double care and

reverent hearts square all things that we, the architect of our spiritual temple, may find favour in the all-seeing eye of the great Architect and be permitted to walk forever on the level in realms of eternal light.

The **Serpent**. There are two kinds of symbolism in all ancient religions:

(1) The enemy of Man and therefore the representative of the power of evil.

(2) Emblem of Divine Wisdom. (Matthew 10-16. *"Be ye wise as serpents"* does not refer to the craftiness of the devil but to divine wisdom.)

In ancient Egypt, the Soul as he passed through the underworld met with serpents of evil and also with serpents of good. In India legend tells us of a whole order of beings, the Serpent Folk, who are of a spiritual nature - different from man, possessed of their own rulers and endowed with superhuman wisdom. Some of these were considered to be friendly to man while others were hostile. The Sacred Cobra is well known to every student of Hindu religion and is essentially good. Actual worship is paid to the serpent throughout the whole of India and in many other parts of the world. In the Kabala we get traces of the fact that under certain circumstances the serpent is regarded as "the Shining One", the Holy Wisdom itself. Thus we see that the Serpent on our apron denotes that we are encircled by the Holy Wisdom. Finally - the serpent biting its tail and thus forming a circle, has always been regarded as the emblem of Eternity and more especially of the Eternal Wisdom of

God.

As the Master Mason advances and becomes Master of his Lodge, the rosettes of his apron give way to three **Taus or levels** as they are generally called. The Tau is the symbol of the Creator. It is said that Tau was the mark set upon the foreheads of those referred to in Ezekiel 9-4th Verse 4 (see also Rev. 7-3): "*Go through the midst of the city, and set a mark upon the foreheads of the men that sigh and cry for all the abominations that be done in the midst thereof,*" which mark was to distinguish them as persons to be saved on account of their sorrow for sin, from the idolaters who were to be slain. With reference to the 9th Chapter of Ezekiel, 4th Verse, the Holy Bible as used by the Roman Catholics, translated from the Latin Vulgate says: "*Go through the midst of Jerusalem and mark thou upon the foreheads of men that sign.*"

Tau is the last letter in the Hebrew alphabet. The Greek letter Tau is T. This Tau cross was of universal use as a sacred symbol among the ancients. The Hebrews used it as a sign of Salvation. It is thought to be much older than the time of Ezekiel and that when Moses anointed Aaron as the High Priest, he marked his forehead with this sign. It is said to have saved the youthful Isaac from death, redeemed from destruction an entire people whose houses were so marked, healed the venomous bites of those who looked up at the serpent, raised in the form of a "tau" upon a pole, and called back the soul into the dead body of the son of that poor widow who had given bread to the prophet. It was a mark worn by the devotees of Brahmah. To the Druids it was a symbol of their supreme God. The Tau Cross as worn on the Master's Apron, replacing the Rosettes, is thought by some to be the Egyptian Ankh, as worn by the ancient Egyptian Gods. The Ankh represent Life. Every God carried it. The T or Tau cross, is an ancient symbol of the ongoing of Eternal Life. The vertical line represents the inner nature of the individual intelligence. The cross bar in the beginning is at the bottom. As life goes on, obstructions and temptations to right living are gradually overcome. When the cross bar has risen three quarters, the individual Intelligence of Soul has "lived the life" and worked out his own salvation. When the cross bar is at the top, the soul has triumphed over death and the conscious self-identity of his own individual intelligence independent of his physical body assures him of the on-going of eternal life, symbolised by the circle added to the Tau Cross. The Gods are cosmic principles, and in man are powers and attributes of the Soul. Every part of the Egyptian God had a deep symbolic meaning such as the Sceptre as a symbol of power. It will be seen in reference to drawings of Goddesses that they carry a reed sceptre for this reason: The reed is a water plant, symbol of the first life, coming from a concealed source, making its way through the material mud and then the less dense or limped water, up into the material air. The reed is carried by the goddesses as a symbol of the source of human life over which they have dominion.

Whilst we are mainly concerned with the English Masonic apron (albeit Victorian and somewhat Scottish and Irish), reference to the Masonic clothing in other lands may be of interest:

Belgium. - The Grand Lodge Aprons are of light blue silk, embroidered with gold fringe, without tassels. The collars are embroidered with gold with the jewels of office, and with acacia and other emblems.

Egypt. - The Grand Orient uses the same clothing as the Grand Lodge of England, but the colours are thistle and sea green. The rank of wearer is denoted by the number of stars on his collar.

France. - The Grand Orient has aprons very elaborately embroidered or painted and edged with crimson or blue. In the third degree, blue embroidered sashes are used lined with black.

Greece. - In recent years the clothing has become exactly identical with that worn in England, although formerly silk and satin aprons painted and embroidered with crimson were worn.

Germany. - Aprons varied greatly in size and shape, from square to the shape of a shield. Some bear rosettes and others the level. There is no uniformity and German Lodges had jewels apparently according to the taste of each.

Holland. - Each Lodge selects its own colours for aprons and the ribbons to which the jewels are attached. Individuals may use embroidery, fringes, etc., according to their own fancy.

Hungary. - The members of Grand Lodge wear collars of light blue silk with a narrow edging of red, white and green-their national colours-from which are suspended five pointed stars. The Grand Lodge Officers wear collars of orange colour edged with green and lined with white silk. They are embroidered with the acacia and the emblems of office. The aprons have a blue edging with three rosettes for a Master Mason.

Italy. - The Entered Apprentice apron is plain white silk. The Fellow craft is edged and lined with a square printed in the centre. The Master Mason wears an apron lined and edged with crimson, bearing the square and compasses. He also wears a sash of green silk, edged with red, embroidered with gold and lined with black on which are embroidered the emblems of mortality in silver. It must be remembered, however, that Freemasonry for some time past has been suppressed in Italy, the reason being that it intermeddled in national politics.

Iceland. - Plain white aprons, edged with blue, bearing the number of the lodge. At the Annual Communication lambskins are worn with a narrow silver braid in the centre of the ribbon. In former days, the Worshipful Master always wore a red cloak and silk hat.

Portugal. - The apron of the Grand Lodge Officers are of white satin, edged with blue and gold and with three rosettes. The collar is made of blue silk with the acacia embroidered in gold.

Spain. - The apron of the Entered Apprentice is of white leather, rounded at the bottom, with a pointed flap, worn raised. The Fellowcraft wears the same with the flap turned down, and the Mason (Master) wears a white satin apron with a curved flap, edged with crimson, and embroidered with a square and compass, enclosing the letter G. The letters M and B, and three stars also appear. It is lined with black silk and embroidered with the skull and crossbones and three stars.

Switzerland. - The clothing is simple. The Entered Apprentice apron is white with the lower corners rounded. The Fellowcraft has blue edging and strings, and the Master Mason has a wider border and three rosettes in the body of the apron, while the flap is covered with blue silk. The apron of the Grand Officers is edged with crimson, without tassels or rosettes, except in the case of the Grand Master, which has three crimson rosettes.

Thus it will be seen that our apron is a very honourable garment, one that we should treasure. It is an apron made of lambskin, pure white, without fault or stain - the colour of the Soul as mortal man sees it. It is ours and it now depends upon each of us to keep it without blemish - to keep it as a mirror of our soul that we may stand the final test when we reach into Life Eternal - which is just beyond. Our Operative Brethren wore an apron to save their clothing from being soiled at work, so the Speculative brother dons it as a desire to be kept unsoiled from the world.

God's message to us is, "Be faithful unto death, and I shall give thee a Crown of Life". Thus may the purity and whiteness of our apron be a reflection of our Soul so that when our name is called on Judgment Day, we may look up to God and say, "I have fought the good fight. I have finished the course and I have kept the Faith."

And the Great Architect will say, "Enter, free and of good report".