

LODGE FURNISHINGS AND DEGREES

BY BRO. H.R. EVANS, LITT. D. 33D HON., WASHINGTON, D.C.

"We 'ad'nt good regalia and our Lodge was old and bare,
But we knew the Ancient Landmarks, and we kept 'em to a hair."

Kipling: Mother Lodge.

MAN is first made a Mason in his heart, after that the Lodge takes hold of him and does the rest. In Rudyard Kipling's Mother Lodge there was no regalia to speak of and the loom was old and bare, but good work was accomplished because the members knew the ancient landmarks and observed them in the spirit as well as the letter of the law. I have seen the degrees of Craft Masonry worked in an old barn, a box for an altar, with three sputtering tallow candles stuck in cleft sticks doing duty for the three lesser lights. And yet, the ritual of the degrees was impressively presented. The glorious creations of Master Will Shakespeare's intellect were acted in barn-like structures, without curtain or scenery, but the Elizabethan audiences were not critical; imagination supplied what was lacking in dramatic mise-en-scene. Perhaps it is well not to rely too much on scenic effects, lest you dull the imagination of the spectator. There is a new school of scenic artists--Russian and German --that paints broadly and impressimistically; indicating a palace, for example, by a column or two, or a doorway heavily curtained, etc. Too great attention to scenic detail does distract the attention from the actor to the scenery. You often hear people say, when speaking of some dramatic production: "O the scenery was wonderful; such magnificence, such realism !" Never a word about the participants in the play. They might as well have been puppets pulled by strings. Now I believe that a happy medium can be struck between an overplus of scenery and a woeful lack of the same; likewise with the costumes of the actors. The Masonic degrees, from Entered Apprentice to Sublime Prince of the Royal Secret (32d) are dramas, and should be so regarded by Masons. They should be properly costumed and presented with appropriate scenic effects, if the lodge funds permit. But a happy limit should be reached in this regard, lest the imagination be dulled. The tendency in the West has been to make a theatre of the Scottish Rite Cathedral. I have had the pleasure of witnessing some very fine degrees in the Western country where everything was elaborately staged, the Brethren being seated in auditorium and galleries just like

people at a show. I do not desire to be hypercritical, but the effect on me has been peculiar. I have always felt that I was not in a Masonic Temple but in a theatre; that I was not a part of the affair but a mere spectator. In a Blue Lodge I never had this feeling, because there was no stage, everything was done on the floor; I was an actual participant in the degree. I must confess that I prefer floor work, and yet there are some degrees of the Scottish Rite that appear better on a stage than on the floor of the Cathedral. Perhaps a happy combination of floor and stage is the solution of the problem. In out-door scenes the stage is the thing. It certainly requires a plethora of imagination to conjure up a rock-bound sea coast in a carpeted and well-upholstered lodge. But for interior scenes the lodge room should suffice and the act consummated therein. I do not think that the spectators--the class, for instance--should occupy the entire floor space of the lodge. That space should be reserved for the actors in the Masonic drama. I have seen the 31d of the Rite worked both on the stage and on the floor, and have long ago come to the conclusion that the floor is the proper place to present it. When acted on the lodge floor, it comes home to you in a wonderfully impressive manner. You feel that you are indeed that poor mummy from Memphis at the Court of the Divine Osiris. The imagination is stirred to its very depths. But in an exclusively stage presentation the imagination has nothing to work on; does not participate in the scene, as it were. It all seems unreal, the mere shadow of a shade, soon forgotten when the curtain closes in.

In Mobile, Alabama, the 31d is regarded particularly as a floor degree, and some remarkable effects of a spectacular nature are obtained that are awe-inspiring, very simple means being utilized to bring them about. In fact, the Consistory of Mobile has no stage, does not believe in one, and yet puts on all the degrees of the Rite in a manner most impressive. Several of the newly-built cathedrals of the Scottish Rite in the Southwest have followed the Mobile idea.

In Brother Rosenbaum's jurisdiction, at Little Rock, Ark., the stage is the thing to catch the conscience of the--I was going to say "king," to complete the Shakespearean quotation, but will change it to "Brethren." I do not believe there is a consistory in the United States where the Scottish Rite degrees are so splendidly presented as in Little Rock, the old home of Albert Pike. If the shade of Pike ever visits this earth, it must

rejoice in the degrees as presented by the Brethren in Arkansas. Brother Rosenbaum is a past master of mise-en-scene. No one who has witnessed the rendition of the Rose-Croix degree, at Little Rock, will ever forget it. But after all is said, I prefer floor work; the more the better. It is only the personal preference of one man, however, and I do not consider myself an expert in things dramatic. I always want to feel that I am an integral part of the Masonic drama, and not a mere spectator. This I do in the Blue Lodge, but not always in the Scottish Rite Cathedral. But as I said before, the happy medium is perhaps the stage and floor.

With this idea in view, how should the room be furnished? I should say, first of all, that the apartment where the degrees are given, should be fashioned after an ancient temple--partly Jewish, partly Egyptian for Solomon's Temple partook of both features. The ceiling might be painted to represent the zodiac. The principal symbols of the Rite should be painted upon medallions around the walls, or upon the proscenium arch. This would do away with the use of a lantern. The stage of course should be equipped for the presentation of all out-door scenes, with the proper lighting effects. The Masonic altar should never be on the stage, but in its regular place in the lodge room. It should, however, be portable, so as to clear the room of all furniture when big floor work was required. There should be no opera-chairs on the main floor. The furniture should correspond with the architecture of the room. Robes of blue, brown, black, etc., might be provided for all Brethren seated on the main floor as spectators. It would give a bit of realism to the scene. I believe this is done in some jurisdictions, and consider it very effective.

I can anticipate one criticism from the Brethren to my views, namely: If you fashion the auditorium after an Oriental temple, where does the Templar idea come in? The Scottish Rite is built upon the Templar theory of Freemasonry. The room should represent a gothic chamber in keeping with the meeting place of Knights Templars--those who went to protect pilgrims to the Holy Sepulchre and came back from the Orient embued with the esoteric philosophy of the East; the secret enemies of the Roman hierarchy. Well, perhaps, the criticism is deserved, but as there are more Oriental degrees worked in the Rite than any other, it comes expedient to build the auditorium after the ancient temple type of architecture.

As regards the architecture of a Scottish Rite Cathedral, I rejoice in the building of the Consistory at Meridian, Mississippi, a picture of which is contained in the New Age Magazine, for July, 1915. It is an Egyptian Temple, so modernized as to admit light into its rooms without destroying that weird effect peculiar to this style of architecture. I consider it a little gem. But here, the carping critic will insinuate: "Why Egyptian?--and not Gothic? It is a cathedral, don't you know!" Well, Mr. Critic, I throw up the sponge! If you want to pin me down to a mere technicality, I have nothing more to say. But the Egyptian temple for mine--with its mysterious sphinxes flanking the entrance, its painted pillars with lotus capitals, its--! I might expatiate forever on this theme without satisfying anybody except myself. Cathedral let it be, if you prefer the Gothic to the Egyptian type, and are a stickler for mere words. I have seen the degrees of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite worked in all kinds of places and in all kinds of ways; but I shall never forget the Rose Croix degree at Little Rock; the 31d at St. Louis (I have never seen the Mobile presentation); the 14d at Wichita; the 15d in my own beloved Consistory at Washington, D. C.; and the Master Mason's degree, at Guthrie. Gentlemen, I thank you!