

CHAPTER XLI THE LETTER G

I

The letter "G" is so intimately related to the symbolism of the Middle Chamber and all connected therewith that it will be wise, just here, to attempt an explanation of that mysterious letter. "Mysterious" is used advisedly because there has been very little agreement among our scholars either as to its origin or to its meaning. Usually, we can hit upon the manner in which a symbol was introduced into the Ritual by studying the records of the early eighteenth century in England, at which time and place the Ritual was cast in its modern form, but such a study cannot help us here because the eighteenth century Masons were themselves confused about the matter. This confusion survives to our own day with some authorities holding to one theory, others to its opposite, and still others, like the Grand Master of one American Jurisdiction, inclined to throw the symbol out altogether. Mackey, who was always so conservative, was quite as radical as this Grand Master, as is witnessed by this statement of his: "It is to be regretted that the letter G as a symbol was ever admitted into the Masonic system."

One writer believes that the G stands for the Greek rendering of "geometry"; another, that it is the initial of the Greek name for "square" ; Brother J. T. Lawrence thinks that it may be an old Egyptian snake emblem; others hold that it was originally the square made "gallows shape," and that this gradually became corrupted into a G. The most common theories, however, are that it stands for Geometry; or that it is the initial of our word "God." It will be necessary to examine these last interpretations more at length, for the evidence seems to favor one or the other, or perhaps both together.

One cannot read the old Masonic Constitutions without being struck by the prominence given to Geometry in their descriptions of Masonry. The oldest copy of them makes Masonry to spring from Geometry, as may be seen in the following excerpt:

"On this manner, through good wit of geometry began first the Craft of Masonry."

Brother Hextall ("A.Q.C.," vol. xxv, p. 97) has pointed out that in every one of the hundred or more copies of these Old Charges, or Old Constitutions, Geometry is placed first among sciences. How can we account for this? The most reasonable explanation would seem to be that Operative Masonry was nothing other than applied Geometry. The builder in that early day had no architectural handbook, no blue prints, no tables of construction; his art was based on Geometry alone, and his skill consisted in knowing by heart many of the processes of Geometry, and his secrets were nothing other than these same processes and the knowledge of applying them. This being the case, it was natural that he should hold his science in high reverence and make its name, represented by its initial letter, to serve as a symbol in his lodge. Such, at any rate, is the reading of the matter as held by a majority of our best modern scholars.

These scholars believe that when Freemasonry became stagnant in the seventeenth century, so that very few lodges remained in existence, Freemasons themselves lost the old explanation of the letter G though they retained: the symbol because it was a part of the system which they inherited. This, so it is believed, accounts for the confused explanations made by eighteenth century writers.

II

How did the letter G ever come to stand for Deity? It is almost impossible to answer this question with any degree of certainty, because the available evidence is so slender, but it is thought by some that an explanation may be found in the connection between Freemasonry and Kabbalism (see p. 28), for it is believed that some of the non-operatives "accepted" by the lodges in the seventeenth century brought a certain amount of Kabbalistic lore with them.

The symbolic system of the Kabbala centers mostly about the Divine Name. According to ancient Jewish traditions the real name of God, given to the Jewish people through Moses, was not permitted to

be written, except with the consonants only. At the time of the Exile the pronunciation and consequently the true spelling, of the Holy Name was lost. The consonants, J (or Y), H, W, H, remained, but what the vowels were nobody could discover ; to find the Lost Name became one of the great ambitions of Jewish priests and scholars, and this search became one of the principal subjects in the literature of the Kabbala. Not having the Name itself the Kabbalists were wont to inscribe a Hebrew "Y" to the centre of a triangle with equal sides and make this stand for it.

It is supposed that this symbol was brought into Masonry by the non-operatives who were Kabbalists, but Divine Name the English initial. Inasmuch as the initial letter of God was the same as the initial letter of Geometry the two symbols became confused, and at last the old Masonic meaning of G was forgotten.

If this history of the matter be correct I have pieced it together from the opinions expressed by many of our scholars I do not see that we need to make any choice between G as standing for Geometry and G as standing for Deity ; the two conceptions merge naturally together because men have always seen in the Geometry which is everywhere found in Nature the clearest unveiling of the Infinite Mind. The Greek philosopher, Pythagoras, who was the first to raise Geometry to the rank of a science, built his philosophical system on numbers and their relations. "All things are in numbers," he said ; "the world is a living arithmetic in its development a realised geometry in its repose." Of a similar mind was Plato, king of Greek philosophers. When' asked how God spends his time, he replied, "God is always geometrising." "Geometry rightly treated is the knowledge of the: eternal." "Geometry must ever tend to draw the soul towards the truth."

III

In spite of the enormous increase in knowledge, we who live twenty-five hundred years after those thinkers can still agree with them ; science has made more apparent the lucid order, the geometric symmetry, of the universe. The very elements of which matter is composed gather themselves together in regular order ; crystals are a solid geometry; the plant, the tree, the construction of an insect's wing, are all symmetrical in their proportion and rhythmical in their motions ; the stars move in curves, the wildest comet inscribes a spiral, and the whole universe is one vast realm of order and design.

As science builds itself on the orderliness of Nature so does Masonry seek to build itself upon the equally certain laws of the human mind. Human beings are not exceptions to the universal reign of law. There are laws of brotherhood, laws of the ideal, as certain in their operations and as undeviating in their processes as the law of gravity. When men learn these laws, and when they adjust their actions to them, they will discover that the face of God has been made plain, they will have learned the secret of the letter G.