

BROTHER LIGHTFOOTE **A MATTER OF DEGREE**

Saturday, June 7th 1783

W Bro Lightfoote (aka Andrew J Montgomery)

Enter Lightfoote, late, confused, and somewhat the worse for drink. He experiences some trouble finding his prepared text, but finally...

Brethren!

It gives me considerable satisfaction to be with you today... to discourse on the matter of our Masonic degrees. You who are gathered here today, must, by now be only too painfully aware of the amount of abject nonsense that has been written and recited on the subject of Masonic history. It appears, does it not, that the origins of our rites and rituals have been invented and imagined, rather than recorded and recounted, to be tirelessly trotted out by a veritable cavalry regiment of hobby-horse jockeys. Lightfoote casts an accusing eye over the previous speakers.

You know who I'm talking about...

Well-intentioned but ill-informed eccentrics, who assure us that our lineage may be traced back to Egypt, Israel, the Garden of Eden, Mount Ararat... some ruin called Rosslyn.

You name it, Brethren, and somebody's written a paper claiming that Masonic rituals based on it. I'm surprised that no-one's as yet suggested that our mysteries were matured in Oporto....

Lightfoote's eye lights upon the Grand Master of Portugal.

Mark you, much to be marvelled at has flowed from Oporto...

Favourite among these fanciful fallacies...

Speaking of Favourites, Brethren, is anyone making a book on the Derby?

Wonderful to think that if Lord Derby hadn't won the toss, the race would be called the Bunbury. Doesn't have quite the same ring to it, does it?

But I digress... Where was I? Ah... Yes...

Favourite among these fanciful fallacies, these cock-eyed concoctions, these intemperate imaginings, is the suggestion that our ceremonies are derived directly from the practices of the mediaeval stone masons' guilds. Now I ask you, brethren, in all honesty, is this likely? I'd say that it was about as likely as the Two Great Pillars at the porchway or entrance to King Solomon's Temple having been formed hollow the better to serve as archives to Masonry - for therein were deposited the Constitutional Rolls. An excellent, space-saving device, Brethren, until one wishes to consult the Constitutional Rolls! I remind you, Brethren, that there were, in earlier times - as there still are - many species of itinerant tradesman: goldsmiths, coopers, thatchers, bottle washers, road menders, chimney sweeps... Every trade and profession has singular skills and peculiar privileges that it deems worthy of protection, the better to maintain the exclusivity - and expense - of the service provided. So why, one may reasonably ask, are there no FreeActors? FreeGardeners? FreeCarpenters?

FreePlumbers?

It must be allowed, I suppose, that our elegant, architectural analogies have rather more appeal, than those available to, say... night-soil men. Imagine it: Entered Excreta... Having said that, might there yet be a better trade than the Mason's to found one's system on? Those of the Vintner and his associates are surely worthy of consideration!

"Rise, if you can, newly intoxicated Brother among Brewers!"

We could be Pissed to the second degree.

I know I was...

Where was I?

Degree, yes... That's it. So... how does Brother Johnson deal with it?

He claims that the word is derived from the French, and defines its meaning as (and I quote):

Quality; Rank; Station; Place of Dignity. The comparative state and condition in which a thing is. A step, as the step of a staircase. Order of lineage; descent of family; Measure; Proportion; The three hundred and sixtieth part of a circle...
Etcetera, etcetera, etcetera...

Say what you will about the French, brethren, but they have some imaginative ideas on how to deal with a redundant aristocracy... absent brethren excepted...

So...

Johnson omits "Qualification" as a definition of Degree, in favour of "Quality". Most of us, however, I am sure, regard the taking of our Masonic degrees rather in the same way as we regarded the taking of examinations at school or university, save that in our Masonic colleges, candidates rarely fail. Even so, failure in Masonic degrees not uncommon, on the part of the supposedly qualified brethren conducting the proceedings. I daresay that most of you, like me, have witnessed a few Third Class Degrees in your time.

Anyway...

Quality; Rank; Station; Place of Dignity; The comparative state and condition in which a thing is.... The implication is that we are progressing, by degrees, to ever higher levels of knowledge and enlightenment. That's what most of like to believe, is it not?
Is it so?

I

The aspiring apprentice enters the Lodge in a state of darkness, which we choose to interpret as ignorance, which could just as well be read as innocence. He is like Adam in the garden, for he can see no evil and is, as yet, uncorrupted by the knowledge of it. He knows not the nature of the darkness and the light, represented by the chequered pavement on which he stands. We proceed to tempt him - do we not, Brethren? - to lead him by the hand, towards taking that fatal step from which there can be no retreat.

We allow him to taste of our forbidden fruit and thus rob him of his chastity and reward him with an apron to cover his newly-discovered nakedness. The Badge of Innocence indeed, it's precisely the opposite!

His innocence is what he's just lost...
Truly he has been Hoodwinked...
We should be ashamed of ourselves!

Thus, the First Degree represents our careless childhood. I suppose one could regard the entry into the lodge, in a state of utter helplessness, as the moment of our birth and the subsequent perambulations and interrogations, during which others answer for us, as our early infancy. Once the veil of ignorance is lifted - and I'm sure that we all remember the moment when our veil of ignorance was first lifted, do we not, Brethren?

In my case it happened in a room at an hotel in Peebles...
but that is by the by.

Once the veil of ignorance is lifted we must answer for ourselves, though we are still in need of guidance. From this moment on, Brethren, life can never be so simple for us as it once was. That which has been learned cannot be unlearned. Pity the poor apprentice! He has already suffered a little death - the loss of innocence - and worse, far worse, is to befall him.

II

A step, as the step of a staircase. Order of lineage; descent of family.

The staircase is the central symbol of the Second Degree as you will, no doubt, recall. Once again, the candidate is presented with the image of an ascent, but now he is qualified, he's in possession of the pass word. No more allowances for him, he's a wage earner, and so he goes to collect his pay from the middle chamber of the Temple, and a right good Fellow he feels himself to be.

But is he?

As an Apprentice, poor and penniless though he was, he still clung to the last vestige of his purity and professed a propensity towards Charity. He was told that that was the distinguishing characteristic of a Freemason's heart. Now, as a Craftsman, he's encouraged to get up those stairs, quick and lively, and

collect his cash! Now that he's earning good specie, you note that there's no reminder of his obligations towards the less well off. Business is business, Brother.
The Apprentice class can kiss my arse,
I've got the Craftsman's job at last...

The ladder of the first degree tracing board can now be pulled up, can't it? because we're all right, Jac...
Now I don't want to pick out any individual masons or groups of masons for particular criticism in this regard. We're all guilty of it - to some degree...

I was, however, a guest in a so-called Grand Stewards Lodge recently. I watched the alms dish circulate and the great and the good putting in their shillings and their sixpences - in some cases putting in a shilling and taking sixpence back... Then off we went to White's to eat a dinner that cost a guinea a head.

Now... Brethren, might it not be a good idea for us to initiate the practice of going without dinner once a year - and donating our dining fees to feed the hungry? It wouldn't do us any harm; it surely wouldn't do me any harm, it certainly wouldn't do the Grand Stewards any harm... On that evening we might, instead of repairing to the tavern, remain in the temple, sharing some insights rather than stuffing our insides. I've often thought that Masonic temples might be left open, outside of "working hours" for quiet contemplation, for I know of no space more serene...

Do you?

We may not stand on holy ground, Brethren, but truly we have found common ground, and that it a rare and precious situation.

The Fellow Craft finally gains the summit of the winding staircase, whose seven or more steps might just as well be an allusion to the seven deadly sins that frail flesh is heir to:
Pride One wouldn't find that in a Masonic Lodge, surely?

Anger ...
Envy ...
Avarice ...
Gluttony Aye... there's the rub...
Lust Hopefully not.
Sloth Well we've all shown up today, haven't we?
Such is our lineage, such is our descent...

We now consider ourselves fit to face the final frontier - to take the third step - to journey towards that unknown country from whose bourne no traveller returns...

III

Measure; Proportion; The three hundred and sixtieth part of a circle... Music comes in measures, does it not, and in divisions and in degrees?

The Third Degree, as we all know, Brethren, invites us to Dance with Death, but first we are forced to listen to the sad litany of the treachery of our comrades, the murder of our master and the loss of our secrets.

We have come all this way, we have suffered so many indignities and privations, in the fervent hope of gaining some knowledge, some insight, some enlightenment... but at the end it appears that our time has been totally wasted.

I suspect that many of you are feeling like that right now, Brethren...
Bear with me!

The three hundred and sixtieth part of a circle... One degree, one minute, one second. the sixtieth part of the sixtieth part. The last moment of our mortal existence is at hand. We stare into the mouth of the grave, we confront our inevitable doom, corrupt, guilt ridden, unworthy before Him who, alone, is truly worshipful.

What is to become of us?

The hand of the clock moves on. It ticks off our last breath, it counts our final heartbeat. The chimes of midnight sound, our day is done, and then a new day dawns, does it not?

Is not everything in creation cyclic, Brethren? As the face of your watch, the days of the week, the seasons of the year, the seed time and the harvest. They just go round and round in circles, don't they?

On and on and on, like me... Like you.
There is no end to it, you see.
It's just a matter of degree.

We are all of us at different points in our respective revolutions - some of us are more revolutionary than others - like our Colonial Brethren who took it upon themselves to dress up as savages and chuck all that tea into Boston Harbour.

Lightfoote beams benevolently upon the Gentleman from New York.

Good for them! Freemasonry, Brethren, was founded with the express intention of allowing intelligent men, men with enquiring minds, men like us - like me, at any rate - to question the Established Order and to endeavour to replace it with a Stronger and more Stable Structure.
What has happened to us?

By degrees, we have become part of the Establishment. Ours, Brethren, is a subversive society that has been subverted, comprehensively, by the corrosive elements of temperance and conformity. Is it any wonder that the Brotherhood is held in disrepute?

I'm beginning to feel a gin coming on, Brethren, but before I retire to the Jug and Bot I will offer you this to take away with you:
Brethren of the Pigeon Pie
The night is waning fast,
If we're to do before we die
This chance might be our last.

Be cross, be crass, be cussed,
But be not satisfied.
We have the power to change the world
It's time it was applied!
Farwell, Brethren!

Applause, hopefully, as Lightfoote bows out.