



Symbolism of the Compass

By Bro. B. C. Ward, Iowa

Let us behold the glorious beauty that lies hidden beneath the symbolism of the Square and Compass; and first as to the Square. Geometry, the first and noblest of the sciences, is the basis on which the superstructure of Masonry has been erected. As you know, the word "Geometry" is derived from two Greek words which mean "to measure the earth," so that Geometry originated in measurement; and in those early days, when land first began to be measured, the Square, being a right angle, was the instrument used, so that in time the Square began to symbolize the Earth. And later it began to symbolize, masonically, the earthly-in man, that is man's lower nature, and still later it began to symbolize man's duty in his earthly relations, or his moral obligations to his Fellowmen. The symbolism of the Square is as ancient as the Pyramids. The Egyptians used it in building the Pyramids. The base of every pyramid is a perfect square, and to the Egyptians the Square was their highest and most sacred emblem. Even the Chinese many, many centuries ago used the Square to represent Good, and Confucius in his writings speaks of the Square to represent a Just man.

As Masons we have adopted the 47th Problem of Euclid as the rule by which to determine or prove a perfect Square. Many of us remember with what interest we solved that problem in our school days. The Square has become our most significant Emblem. It rests upon the open Bible on this altar; it is one of the three great Lights; and it is the chief ornament of the Worshipful Master. There is a good reason why this distinction has been conferred upon the Square. There can be nothing truer than a perfect Square--a right angle. Hence the Square has become an emblem of Perfection.

Now a few words as to the Compass: Astronomy was the second great science promulgated among men. In the process of Man's evolution there came a time when he began to look up to the stars and wonder at the vaulted Heavens above him. When he began to study the stars, he found that the Square was not adapted to the measurement of the Heavens. He must have circular measure; he needed to draw a circle from a central point, and so the Compass was employed. By the use of the Compass man began to study the starry Heavens, and as the Square primarily symbolized the Earth, the Compass

began to symbolize the Heavens, the celestial canopy, the study of which has led men to think of God, and adore Him as the Supreme Architect of the Universe. In later times the Compass began to symbolize the spiritual or higher nature of man, and it is a significant fact that the circumference of a circle, which is a line without end, has become an emblem of Eternity and symbolizes Divinity; so the Compass, and the circle drawn by the Compass, both point men Heaven ward and God ward.

The Masonic teaching concerning the two points of the Compass is very interesting and instructive. The novitiate in Masonry, as he kneels at this altar, and asks for Light sees the Square, which symbolizes his lower nature, he may well note the position of the Compass. As he takes another step, and asks for more Light, the position of the Compass is changed somewhat, symbolizing that his spiritual nature can, in some measure, overcome his evil tendencies. As he takes another step in Masonry, and asks for further Light, and hears the significant words, "and God said let there be Light, and there was Light," he sees the Compass in new light; and for the first time he sees the meaning, thus unmistakably alluding to the sacred and eternal truth that as the Heavens are higher than the Earth, so the spiritual is higher than the material, and the spiritual in man must have its proper place, and should be above his lower nature, and dominate all his thoughts and actions. That eminent Philosopher, Edmund Burke, once said, "It is ordained that men of intemperate passions cannot be free. Their passions forge the chains which bind them, and make them slaves." Burke was right. Masonry, through the beautiful symbolism of the Compass, tells us how we can be free men, by permitting the spiritual within us to overcome our evil tendencies, and dominate all our thoughts and actions. Brethren, sometimes in the silent quiet hour, as we think of this conflict between our lower and higher natures, we sometimes say in the words of another, "Show me the way and let me bravely climb to where all conflicts with the flesh shall cease. Show me that way. Show me the way up to a higher plane where my body shall be servant of my Soul. Show me that way."

-Source: The Builder October 1916

This is the plural of compass, from the Latin corn, meaning "together," and passus, meaning a pass, step, way, or route. Contrivance, cunning, encompass, pass, pace derive from the same roots. A circle was once described as a compass because all the steps in making it were "together," that is, of the same distance from the center; and the word, natural transition, became applied to the familiar two-legged' instrument for drawing a circle. Some Masons use the word in the singular, as in "square and compass," hut the plural form "square and compasses" would appear to be preferable, especially since it immediately distinguishes the working tool from the mariner's compass, with which it might be otherwise confused by the uninformed.

s in Operative Freemasonry, the compasses are used for the measurement of the architect's plans, and to enable him to give those just proportions which will ensure beauty as well as stability to his work; so, in Speculative Freemasonry, is this important implement symbolic of that even tenor of deportment, that true standard of rectitude which alone can bestow happiness here and felicity hereafter.

Hence are the compasses the most prominent emblem of virtue, the true and only, measure of a Freemason's life and conduct. As the Bible gives us light on our duties to God, and the square illustrates our duties to our neighborhood and Brother, so the compasses give that additional light which is to instruct us in the duty we owe to ourselves-the great, imperative duty of circumscribing our passions, and keeping our desires within due bounds. "It is ordained," says the philosophic Burke, "in the eternal

constitution of things, that men of intemperate passions cannot be free; their passions forge their fetters." Those Brethren, who delight to trace our emblems to an astronomical origin, find in the compasses a symbol of the sun, the circular pivot representing the body of the luminary, and the diverging legs his rays.

In the earliest rituals of the eighteenth century, the compasses are described as a part of the furniture of the Lodge, and are said to belong to the Master.

Some change will be found in this respect in the ritual of the present day (see Square and Compasses).

The word is sometimes spelled and pronounced compass, which is more usually applied to the magnetic needle and circular dial or card of the mariner from which he directs his course over the seas, or the similar guide of the airman when seeking his destination across unknown territory.

- Source: Mackey's Encyclopedia of Freemasonry

In our study of the Square we saw that it is nearly always linked with the Compasses, and these old emblems, joined with the Holy Bible, are the Great Lights of the Craft. If the Lodge is an "Oblong Square" and built upon the Square (as the earth was thought to be in olden time), over it arches the Sky, which is a circle. Thus Earth and Heaven are brought together in the Lodge - the earth where man goes forth to his labor, and the heaven to which he aspires. In other words, the light of Revelation and the Law of Nature are like the two points of the Compasses within which our life is set under a canopy of Sun and Stars.

No symbolism can be more simple, more profound, more universal, and it becomes more wonderful the longer one ponders it. Indeed, if Masonry is in any sense a religion, it is Universe Religion, in which all men can unite. Its principles are as wide as the world, as high as the sky. Nature and revelation blend in its teaching; its morality is rooted in the order of the world, and its roof is the blue vault above. The Lodge, as we are apt to forget, is always open to the sky, whence come those influences which exalt and ennoble the life of man. Symbolically, at least, it has no rafters but the arching heavens to which, as sparks ascending seek the sun, our life and labor tend. Of the heavenly side of Masonry the Compasses are the Symbol, and they are perhaps the most spiritual of our working tools.

As has been said, the Square and the Compasses are nearly always together, and that is true as far back as we can go. In the sixth book of the philosophy on Mencius, in China, we find these words: "A Master Mason, in teaching Apprentices, makes use of the Compass and the Square. Ye who are engaged in the pursuit of wisdom must also make use of the Compass and the Square. Note the order of the words: the Compass has first place, as it should have to a Master Mason. In the oldest classic of China, "The Book of History," dating back two thousand years before our era, we find the Compasses employed without the Square: "Ye Officers of the Government, apply the Compasses." Even in that far off time these symbols had the same meaning they have for us today, and they seem to have been interpreted in the same way.

While in the order of the Lodge the Square is first, in point of truth it is not the first in order. The Square rests upon the Compasses before the Compasses rest upon the Square. That is to say, just as a perfect square is a figure that can be drawn only within a circle or about a circle, so the earthly life of man moves and is built within the circle of Divine life and law and love which surrounds, sustains, and explains it. In the Ritual of the Lodge we see man, hoodwinked by the senses, slowly groping his way out of darkness, seeking the light of morality and reason. But he does so by the aid of inspiration from above, else he would live untroubled by a spark Some deep need, some dim desire brought him to

the door of the Lodge, in quest of a better life and a clearer vision. Vague gleams, impulses, intimations reached him in the night of Nature, and he set forth and finding a friendly hand to help knocked at the door of the House of Light.

As an Apprentice a man is, symbolically, in a crude, natural state, his divine life covered and ruled by his earthly nature. As a Fellowcraft he has made one step toward liberty and light and the nobler elements in him are struggling to rise above and control his lower, lesser nature. In the Sublime Degree of a Master Mason - far more sublime than we yet realize - by human love, by the discipline of tragedy, and still more by the Divine help the divine in him has subjugated the earthly, and he stands forth strong, free, and fearless, ready to raise stone upon stone until naught is wanting. If we examine with care the relative positions of the Square and Compasses as he advanced through the Degrees, we learn a parable and a prophecy of what the Compasses mean in the life of a Mason.

Here too, we learn what the old philosopher of China meant when he urged Officers of the Government to "apply the Compasses,; since only men who have mastered themselves can really lead or rule others. Let us now study the Compasses apart from the Square, and try to discover what they have to teach us. There is no more practical lesson in Masonry and it behooves us to learn it and lay it to heart. As the Light of the Holy Bible reveals our relation and duty to God, and the Square instructs us in our duties to our Brother and neighbor, so the Compasses teach us the obligation which we owe ourselves. What that obligation is needs to be made plain; it is the primary, imperative, everyday duty of circumscribing his passions, and keeping his desires within due bounds. As Most Excellent King Solomon said long ago: "Better is he that ruleth his spirit than he that taketh a city.:

In short, it is the old triad, without which character loses its symmetry, and life may easily end in chaos and confusion. It has been put in many ways, but never better than in the three great words; self-knowledge, self-reverence, self-control; and we cannot lose any one of the three and keep the other two. To know ourselves, our strength, our weakness, our limitations, is the first principle of wisdom, and a security against many a pitfall and blunder. Lacking such knowledge, or disregarding it, a man goes too far, loses control of himself, and by that very fact loses, in some measure, the self-respect which is the corner stone of a character. If he loses respect for himself, he does not long keep his respect for others, and goes down the road to destruction, like a star out of orbit, or a car into the ditch.

The old Greeks put the same truth into a trinity of maximums: "Know thyself; in nothing too much; think as a mortal; and it made them masters of the art of life and the life of art. Hence their wise Doctrine of the Limit, as a basic idea of their thoughts, and their worship of the God led them to consider the Compasses is the symbol. It is the wonder of our human life that we belong to the limited and to the unlimited. Hemmed in, hedged about, restricted, we long for a liberty without rule or limit. Yet limitless liberty is anarchy and slavery. As in the great word of Burke, "It is ordained in the eternal constitution of things, that a man of intemperate passions cannot be free; his passions forge their fetters." Liberty rests upon law. The wise man is he who takes full account of both, who knows how, at all points, to qualify the one by the other, as the Compasses, if he uses them aright, will teach him how to do. Much of our life is ruled for us whether we will or not. The laws of nature throw about us their restraining bands, and there is no place where their wit does not run. The laws of the land make us aware that our liberty is limited by the equal rights and liberties of others. Our neighbors, too, if we fail to act toward him squarely may be trusted to look after his own rights. Custom, habit, and the pressure of public opinion are impalpable forces which we dare not altogether defy. These are so many roads from which our passions and appetites stray at-our-peril. But there are other regions of life where personality has free play, and they are the places

where most of our joy and sorrow lie. It is in the realm of desire, emotion, motive, in the inner life where we are freest, and most alone, that we need a wise and faithful use of the Compasses. How to use the Compasses is one of the finest of all arts, asking for the highest skill of a Master Mason. If he is properly instructed, he will rest one point in the innermost center of his being and with the other draw a circle beyond which he will not go, until he is ready and able to go farther. Against the littleness of his knowledge he will set the depth of his desire to know, against the brevity of his earthly life the reach of his spiritual hope. Within a wise limit he will live and labor and grow, and when he reaches the outer rim of the circle he will draw another, and attain to a full-orbed life, balance, beautiful, and finely poised. No wise man dare forget the maxim "In nothing too much," for there are situations where a word too much, a step too far, means disaster. If he has a quick tongue, a hot temper, a dark mood, he will apply the Compasses, shut his weakness within the circle of his strength, and control it. Strangely enough, even a virtue, if unrestrained and left to itself, may actually become a vice. Praise, if pushed too far, becomes flattery. Love often ends in a soft sentimentalism, flabby and foolish. Faith, if carried to the extreme by the will to believe, ends in over-belief and superstition. It is the Compasses that help us to keep our balance, in obedience to the other Greek maxim: "Think as a mortal" - that is, remember the limits of human thought. An old mystic said that God is a circle whose center is everywhere, and its circumference nowhere. But such an idea is all a blur Our minds can neither grasp nor hold it. Even in our thought about God we must draw a circle enclosing so much of His Nature as we can grasp and realize, enlarging the circle as our experience and thought and vision expand. Many a man loses all truth in his impatient effort to reach final truth. It is the man who fancies that he has found the only truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, and who seeks to impose his dogma upon others, who becomes the bigot, the fanatic, the persecutor. Here, too, we must apply the Compasses, if we would have our faith fulfill itself in fellowship. Now we know in part - a small part, it may be, but it is real as far as it goes - though it be as one who sees in a glass darkly. The promise is that if we are worthy and well qualified, we shall see God face to face and know ever as we are known. But God is so great, so far beyond my mind and yours, that if we are to know him truly, we must know Him Together, in fellowship and fraternity. And so the Poet-Mason was right when he wrote:

"He drew a circle that shut me out,
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout;
But love and I had the wit to win,
We drew a circle that took him in."

- Source: Short Talk Bulletin - May, 1924