

SHORT TALK BULLETIN - Vol.II

May, 1924

No.5

## THE COMPASSES

by: Unknown (Probably Car; H. Claudy)

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 realiz  
 e -  
 by human love, by the discipline of tragedy, and still more by the Div  
 ine  
 help the divine in him has subjugated the earthly, and he stands forth  
 strong, free, and fearless, ready to raise stone upon stone until naug  
 ht 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 urg  
 ed  
 Officers of the Government to "apply the Compasses, : since only men wh  
 o  
 have mastered themselves can really lead or rule others. Let us now s  
 tudy  
 the Compasses apart from the Square, and try to discover what they hav  
 e to  
 teach us. There is no more practical lesson in Masonry and it behoove  
 s us  
 to learn it and lay it to heart. As the Light of the Holy Bible revea  
 ls  
 our relation and duty to God, and the Square instructs us in our dutie  
 s to  
 our Brother and neighbor, so the Compasses teach us the obligation whi  
 ch 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 symme  
 try,  
 and life may easily end in chaos and confusion. It has been put in ma  
 ny  
 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 k  
 eep

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 both of life and of thought, and their worship of the God of bounds, of which the Compasses are a 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 thou  
ght  
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 tru  
th,  
the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, and who seeks to impose hi  
s  
dogma upon others, who becomes the bigot, the fanatic, the persecutor.

Here, too, we must apply the Compasses, if we would have our faith ful  
fill  
itself in fellowship. Now we know in part - a small part, it may be,  
but  
it is real as far at 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 s  
hall  
see God face to face and know ever as we are known. But God is so gre  
at,  
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-Maso  
n 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."