

TRAVELLING CRAFTSMEN

by

Bro. E. Elliston, California

Until comparatively recent times no historical work on Freemasonry was considered complete without an account of the "Travelling Masons." We have been gravely assured by the writers on the subject, that Freemasonry in medieval times was an international association of church builders, incorporated under a charter issued by the pope, granting to the society a complete monopoly in the building of religious edifices. It was said that the mysteries of Gothic architecture, both operative and speculative (practical and theoretical), were the particular secrets of the corporation; and whenever a new cathedral or other religious house was contemplated requisitions for plans and specifications must be made to the headquarters of the body. When the plans were prepared and approved, orders for details of craftsmen were sent from headquarters to the subordinate lodges throughout Christendom; and from north and south, east and west, masons obeyed the summons and journeyed to the site of the proposed building, under the leadership of their overseers or wardens.

On arrival at their destination, they made themselves known to the master builder by means of secret signs and tokens. Huts, or lodges, were then built, in which the workmen prepared the material for the structure in accordance with plans and specifications. In these lodges the craftsmen held their meetings, and here the mysteries of the craft were imparted to such profanes as had been found "worthy and well qualified."

It was claimed, further, that under the terms of the charter, the fraternity was empowered to determine the wages and hours of labour of its members, as well as other conditions of employment. The craftsmen were not subject to the law of the land; but all charges or accusations against a member, whether made by a fellow or by a profane, were tried before the tribunal of the society which was clothed with complete judicial powers.

But alas, the belief in the existence of an international corporation of builders has been shattered and swept into the dust by Robert F. Gould, together with many other venerable cobwebs which had gathered around the columns and arches of the Masonic edifice, thus preventing us from viewing the structure in the light of true history.

Gould demonstrates conclusively that "International Freemasonry" in the Middle Ages is a fiction. Careful search in the archives of the Vatican has failed to bring to light the slightest evidence that the Masonic Craft has ever received any special honors or favours from the pope; and the only basis for the belief in papal patronage seems to be that at various times popes and prelates issued bulls promising indulgences to persons who should make liberal donations of money, lands or labour, to churches in course of construction.

Nor has anyone been successful in locating the headquarters of this "international society." True, the German Steinmetzen (Freemasons) were organized along more than local lines. In 1567 they formed a federation of craft societies in German lands and elected the workmaster of Strassburg cathedral their chief judge (Oberste Rychter); but the federation did not extend beyond the boundaries of Germany, and the authority of the central government did not at any time receive more than

passing recognition. As a matter of fact, the real bond of union between the constituent bodies lay in their common objects and common craft usages.

Gould has further shown that the general features of the Freemason's craft societies did not differ from those of other callings, and such differences as did exist were due to local conditions and the peculiarities of the trade.

In the first place, the Freemasons' guilds were of later origin than those of other crafts. The former did not come into existence until architecture and building operations generally had become so refined as to necessitate specialization and subdivision of labour. Originally all masons, whether they worked in rough or squared stone (ashlar) or brick, as well as tilers, slaters and those working in the other component divisions of the building industry, were members of the same guild. As time passed the lines of demarcation between the different branches of the industry became more clearly defined with a consequent division of the organization. Finally, when the art of Gothic building had so far advanced that it became necessary to specially train men as architects and to design and execute the delicate stonework and sculpture, a future division took place. The architects, designers and sculptors branched off from the mother society and organized separately. Their work was of the highest character, and became more art than a craft, requiring technical and science knowledge as well as great manual skill. Their profession stood at the head of the building trades, and became known as Freemasonry.

Only a limited number of fellows were required; and in consequence we find masters, journeymen (fellow crafts) and apprentices members of the same guild; while in other trades, such as the masons' and carpenters' employing larger bodies of men, the journeymen at an early period withdrew from the masters and formed fraternities of their own. The apprentices, while they were members of the craft, were not eligible to membership in the guild.

There were still other points of difference: The Freemasons were employed almost exclusively upon religious buildings. This brought their craft in close contact with the clergy, and from this association the Freemasons' societies received a deep religious imprint that is not apparent in those of other crafts.

The profession of Freemasonry was held in high esteem in the Middle Ages. The Church was rich and powerful and displayed its wealth and taste in the construction of beautiful churches. In fact, church architecture was the only outlet for the genius of the people; all the intellectual forces of society seemed to converge in architecture and kindred professions; and the calling, therefore, attracted the best minds and the highest intellects of the times. All other knowledge was discouraged and condemned by the Church.

Victor Hugo says that down to the time of the invention of printing the progress of humanity in art and science is recorded in a "book of stone" - Architecture!

Gothic architecture commenced to decline after the Reformation. The power of the Church was broken; its right to levy contributions upon the people was taken from it; and the people found other means of satisfying their desire for knowledge, and to gratify their artistic tastes.

Freemasonry as an operative art declined with the discontinuance of Gothic church building, and with it went the operative fraternities. In order to perpetuate the

institution, the lodges admitted to membership men who had not been bred to the trade. In many cases these "accepted" brethren were men of learning and science, and through their influence the lodges were gradually transformed into "speculative", or philosophical societies, in which form they have come down to our times.

As time passed, the old customs of the operative days fell into disuse and became only memories and traditions; and, later, more or less fantastic explanations of their meaning and purpose were invented, such as the legend of the "Travelling Masons."

In order to get a clear view of the craft usages of our operative Masonic forefathers, we must look for their parallels in kindred crafts, such as the masons and carpenters, whose fraternities have had a continuous existence from the Middle Ages down to our own day.

Gould, in his chapter on the German Steinmetzen (Freemasons), borrows freely from the carpenters and masons for illustration of Masonic customs. He conveys the impression that these societies, like their Freemasonic relatives, have become extinct. In reality they still exist, although now rapidly falling into decay, due to several reasons: the encroachment of modern trades-unionism; the fact that the state has assumed some of their benevolent and charitable functions; and, finally, because the stringent apprenticeship rules are being more and more relaxed.

It is an immemorial custom in these crafts, when an apprentice has completed his service, to spend three years in travel from place to place, working for a time in each. The purpose of his journey is to familiarize himself with the methods employed in various places; to enable him to "see the world," and, finally, to prevent crowding the trade. In this pilgrimage the journeyman travels under the auspices and protection of his craft guild, or fraternity.

Following are a few facts concerning these organizations with particular reference to the carpenter's trade, a body which claims to be the senior of the building trades guilds, and to have had a continuous existence from the early centuries of the Middle Ages.

The name of the society is "Die Fremde Zimmergessellen." The translation of the name presents some difficulties. "Fremde" in German means either a foreigner or a stranger, or one absent from home. Considering the connection in which the word is here used, "travelling" is the nearest equivalent in English. The name therefore signifies the "Travelling Journeymen Carpenters." The name reminds us of that used by the journeymen's societies of France (Sons of Solomon) whose members called themselves "compagnons etrangers" (stranger companions).

The headquarters of the German carpenters' fraternity is at Bremen, and its subordinate lodges are dispersed throughout Central Europe. A new lodge may be formed in any place upon the petition of not less than seven members; but only one lodge may be chartered in any one city or town. In the vernacular of the craft, the opening of a new lodge is described as "Opening the Book," so called from the "Brotherbook," a manuscript volume containing the statutes and regulations of the fraternity, without which no lodge can be legally held. The copy of the Brotherbook, therefore serves the purpose of a charter. Lodges are sometimes opened in remote foreign countries; for instance, in Jerusalem, 1900; in Paris, 1904, and at Liege, Belgium, 1914.

The executive head of the fraternity is called Hauptaltgeselle (Chief Senior Fellow), and the General Secretary-Treasurer is called Hauptbuchgeselle. Local lodges are presided over by the Senior Fellow (Altgeselle); the Secretary is called Buchgeselle. These officers are elected for six months. In addition the local bodies have an appointive officer, who performs the joint duties of Steward and Doorkeeper.

When the apprentice has been set free by his master, after three years' service, he applies for admission into the journeymen's fraternity. His application is presented by a member who has worked with him and who vouches for his character and qualifications. The application must be accompanied by a certificate from the master under whom the applicant has learned his trade. In certain states the law prohibits the apprentice from taking employment as a journeyman until he has made an essay, or masterpiece. In such case proof, of masterpiece must be furnished. If no objection is made, the application is approved, and the candidate is notified to present himself for initiation at the next meeting of the lodge. Should objection be made, the application is rejected without a ballot.

After the lodge has been formerly opened the candidate is taken in charge by the member who presented his application, and who now acts as his sponsor. He is conducted to the Senior Fellow's station in the lodge. A number of questions are put to him by the Senior Fellow, and are answered for him by his sponsor. This dialogue refers to the importance and dignity of the craft, the objects of the fraternity, and in particular to the duty of the individual fellow to his brethren and to the craft. The candidate is asked whether he is willing to subscribe to these sentiments, and on his reply in the affirmative the obligation is administered, to the observance of which he pledges his word as a true man. He is then presented with "die Ehrbarkeit" (literally: Virtue), a black neckerchief, and is informed that this piece of attire is a symbol of manly virtue and the particular badge of the fraternity. He is instructed to wear it during all his waking hours, whether work or at play, and solemnly admonished never to disgrace it by word or act.

In former times the fellows wore a distinctive livery, consisting of a short black velvet jacket double rows of silver buttons, knee breeches of the same material, and black hat and shoes, together with the indispensable neckcloth. The livery has long since fallen into disuse, although the wearing of the "Ehrbarkeit" continues. It is still considered improper to wear shoes of any colour other than black, and the members have a special aversion to white hats.

Then follows a lecture by the Senior Fellow in which the candidate is instructed in the rules and regulations of the fraternity, its customs and usages; how to conduct himself while travelling; how to present himself and make himself known to his brethren in foreign parts, etc. At stated times the Brotherbook is also read in the lodge. There is no mention of any grip or token; only a brief catechism to which we shall hereafter refer.

The candidate is now a Junior Fellow (Junggeselle), and the ceremonies are concluded by draping his "ribbon" across the bar under the coat of arms of the craft, suspended over the Senior Fellow's station. This ribbon is of silk, about; six feet long by two inches wide, of any colour to suit the taste of the candidate; on one end is inscribed his name and the place and date of his birth; on the other, the date of his admission into the fraternity. The Senior Fellow orders the Steward to fill the "Harmony Tankard" (Vertragskanne), a large drinking vessel, which forms an indispensable part of the furniture of the lodge. The tankard is brought to the Senior

Fellow, who dips his gavel in the beer and sprinkles a few drops of the liquid on the new-made brother's ribbon, and expresses the hope that the later will always live in amity and harmony with his brethren. The business of the lodge being concluded, the Senior Fellow calls off, and the health of the new brother is drunk, while the members join in singing their craft songs, of which they have many.

I may mention here the peculiar form of salutation. A member is never addressed in lodge as brother or comrade; but always as "Ehrbarer Gesellschaft" (trustworthy fellowship). The form of address of the Senior Fellow is "Ehrbarer Altgeselle."

The members remain standing "in order" during the entire meeting, heels together, toes pointing out, coat tightly buttoned and the hat held in the right hand over the left breast. This attitude is characteristic of the fraternity and is assumed on all occasions of craft business and ceremony. The Senior Fellow also presides standing, but with covered head.

When the Junior Fellow is ready to travel, he applies to the lodge for clearance; but before it is granted must satisfy the Senior Fellow that he has parted with his master in friendship, that he is in fellowship with his brethren, and last but not least, that he is clear of debt. These matters being satisfactorily settled, he is given a clearance card, or "brief," as it is called, signed by the Senior Fellow and Secretary. The Senior Fellow again reminds the journeyman about to set out, that under the laws of the fraternity he is obliged to travel for three years; that at least once a year he must visit a city where a lodge is located, and work there not less than six weeks; that he should not remain in the same place longer than six months, and in no event more than one year; that he must not return to his birthplace, or the place where he learned his trade, during his wandering years, except to attend the funeral of a near relative, and in such case he should only remain over night. He is warned against keeping bad company and against incurring any debt, and urged to conduct himself in such a manner as to reflect credit upon the fraternity.

The "traveler's" health is then drunk by his brethren with the wish for a pleasant journey and safe return.

The lodge meetings are invariably held on Saturday night, and on the following day he sets out on his travels. In former times the brethren of the lodge accompanied him beyond the city gates with music and song, but this custom is now obsolete. He invariably journeys on foot, although there is no special inhibition against the use of speedier means of transportation.

On arrival at his destination, he goes to the house of call (herberg). This is an inn frequented by his fellow craftsmen, where their lodge room is located. Some of these houses of call belong to the fraternity. He presents himself at the lodge door and knocks three times. He is received by the Senior Fellow, or some other brother detailed for the purpose. He assumes the posture already, described, and the following dialogue takes place:

Senior Fellow: Your name!

Fellow: (gives his name).

Senior Fellow: Who are you?

Fellow: A true and trustworthy (ehrbarer und rechtschaffer) Travelling Journeyman Carpenter, from . . .

Senior Fellow: What do you desire?

Fellow: Under favour and by your leave, (mit Gunst und Erlaubnitz), to ask the trusty (ehrbarer) Senior Fellow to furnish me employment for eight or fourteen days or as long as it may suit the master, and according to craft custom and usage.

Senior Fellow: 'Tis well! (das ist loeblich! Literally: Praiseworthy; an obsolete expression).

Senior Fellow: Your brief!

Fellow: (presents clearance card).

Senior Fellow examines the card and finding it in order says: Be at ease! (Macht commode!)

The fellow lays aside his hat, unbuttons his coat and takes his seat. His name is entered upon the visitors' register, and he is told where he may apply for employment. He is then treated to a schnapps and a glass of beer. This ceremony is called "ausschenken"; literally, "drinking him out." He is next informed of the conditions of trade, wages, etc., and in turn he delivers the news of his travels. After this he is introduced to the landlord and landlady of the inn, whom thereafter he calls father and mother. If there is a daughter in the house, he calls her sister.

His supper, night's lodging and breakfast are paid for by the lodge.

If no one is present in the lodge room when he calls, he goes into the tap room of the inn, orders a stein of beer, and waits for some member to appear. When he recognizes an arrival by the black neckerchief, he strikes the table with his stein. The signal is immediately answered by the newcomer, who addresses him as comrade and inquires whether he can be of service.

On the following Saturday he visits the lodge, but is not admitted until the meeting has been formally opened and the Senior Fellow has announced his arrival. He is then introduced to the brethren; thereafter he is recognized as a member of the lodge and entitled to take part in its proceedings.

If no work is procured for him, and he is without funds, the lodge gives security for his board and lodging; but if he owes any debt, he is not granted clearance when he leaves town. Instead, he receives a letter addressed to the Senior Fellow of any lodge to which he may apply, informing him (the Senior Fellow) of the circumstance; and it is the duty of that official to arrange that a reasonable amount be remitted each pay day, until the debt is paid.

Should he arrive at a town in which there is no lodge, he looks up some master who has been a member of the journeymen's fraternity and applies in the prescribed form. The master is authorized to tender such aid as the circumstances require, being reimbursed by the fraternity.

If he should become involved in a quarrel or fight with a fellow member, or be accused of violating the laws or ethics of the craft, he is summoned to appear at lodge. He is examined by the Senior Fellow, who possesses power to hear and determine all questions of craft law and usage, and summarily to impose penalties

upon the guilty brother. Even in grave cases the brethren are not asked to determine the guilt or innocence, or to assess punishment. The power of the Senior Fellow to try and punish is called domestic court (Stubenricht). The defendant has, however, the right of appeal from the decision of the Senior Fellow to the Chief Senior Fellow, and from the judgment of the latter to a commission composed of seven Senior Fellows, chosen from different parts of the jurisdiction. The commission is the supreme court of the order (Schiedgeticht).

If the penalty imposed is a minor fine it is usually paid without question. Part of it is expended for drink, and the atonement is celebrated in convivial spirit.

Should the fellow meet with an accident, or be overtaken by illness, medical care is provided at the expense of the lodge, if he is without means; and the Senior Fellow details brethren in their turn to nurse him until he is able to take care of himself, or until he dies.

In event of death during his years of wandering, he is buried by the lodge. The fraternity has no regular burial service, this being performed by a clergyman; but the brethren follow the remains to the cemetery, wearing their work squares across the right shoulder. Twelve fellows act as pallbearers. As we read in the craft songs:

"Who shall be pallbearers?
Twelve sturdy Journeymen Carpenters."

When the craftsman has completed his years of travel he may settle down in his hometown, or some other place to his liking, and is thereafter called a resident member (Einheimischer). But he does not relinquish his membership in the fraternity unless he becomes a master and goes into business for himself. But even as a master he is in close contact with the craftsmen's body, and is by custom bound to extend the hand of fellowship and do acts of courtesy to such members as may apply to him.

Attention is here called to some peculiar rules of conduct followed by the members. Mention has already been made of the fact that the craftsman must not take off his black neckerchief while at work. If he finds it necessary to open his shirt collar, he simply opens the neckcloth and slips it down his bosom. It is considered bad form to work with sleeves rolled up; and it is regarded as highly improper for a fellow to go more than a house length from his lodging without coat or hat.

We have already noted that the membership is divided into grades. The first, Junior Fellow, is conferred at initiation. From the time he commences travelling he is rated as a Fellow. After three years on the road he is recognized as an Old Fellow, and eligible to election as presiding officer of a lodge. No particular ceremony is connected with the last two "degrees," nor do they confer any distinction beyond that due to superior skill and experience.

In the carpenter's calling the authority of the Senior Fellow does not extend beyond the lodge. In the shop or on the job every fellow is his equal. In this respect the craft differs from the Steinmetzen, whose foreman (parlier) in the shop became ipso facto the warden of the society. This is no doubt due to the fact that in the latter craft all grades were members of the same fraternity.

Like the masons, the carpenters have their cowans. The latter call a travelling journeyman, who is not a member of the society, a "Vogtlander." The origin of the term is unknown, but it signifies one who is willing to work unusually long hours for low wages.

In the reproduction of a clearance card issued by a lodge in Essen, 1904, note the seal, bearing the name of the fraternity around the outer edge, and the central design, composed of the coat of arms of the craft, viz.; A plane between the extended compass, crossed hatchets, two adjacent squares, and, at the bottom, a saw.

Note also the legend printed around the outer border, which may be freely translated, as follows:

"Who can become an apprentice? Any man.
Who shall be fellow craft? He who can.
Who shall be master? He who can design and plan.
What should a Travelling Fellow be? A true man."

It would be interesting to examine this ancient society historically but the means are not at hand. It is claimed that its Brotherbook is several centuries older than that of the Steinmetzen, which was adopted in 1567 and there seems no reason to doubt the statement.

The fraternity at present has no legendary history, such as we find in the Ancient Charges of Freemasonry, but it is more than likely that in former times such history formed part of the secrets of the craft, and that it has either fallen into disuse or been forgotten during those periods when the government attempted to suppress this and similar organizations. During the "blood-and-iron" rule of Bismarck all secret societies and clandestine meetings were forbidden, and though this order did not completely destroy the body, the members had to exercise great care to prevent the police from breaking up their meetings and lodging the members in jail.

Why the black neckerchief? Is it a symbol of mourning for some traditional founder or martyr of the craft? Is it not possible that the original significance of it has been lost or forgotten? How many seamen of today are aware of the fact that the black neckerchief universally worn by the enlisted men of all navies, was originally worn in mourning for Nelson, and that the three white stripes on the naval seaman's shirt collar are commemorative of the three great victories won by that great seaman?

It is my hope that in the near future we shall have available a copy of the carpenter's Brotherbook, which will enable us to form a clearer idea of the inner workings of their craft fraternity.

The Builder
Vol VIII No. 4
April 1922