



Province of East Lancashire

**“Preparing the Candidate
For Initiation”**



Preparing the Candidate for Initiation

For most of us the preparation of a candidate for his entry into a Lodge is something that we have either completely forgotten since it happened to us or have begun to so take for granted that it requires a real effort of memory to recall just what was involved.

Whilst that may often not be a matter of great importance because we have an efficient Tyler or a Past Master who supervises the preparation admirably there is still one aspect of this important part of our practice that ought to matter to us. I mean the understanding of why this preparation was done in the first place and why it is done in this particular manner. When we tackle this subject we shall find not only that we will better recall what has to be done but be able to explain it to anyone who still has questions about it. After all, if the preparation is important we ought to be able to explain why it takes place and in this manner whilst if it is not important then we ought not to be doing it anyway.

So let us look at the six points that make up a true preparation of a candidate for Freemasonry on the occasion of his initiation. They are:

1. His being deprived of all metal objects;
2. the re-arrangement of his clothing;
3. the provision of a sandal or slipper;
4. his being blindfold;
5. having a cable-tow placed round his neck;
6. his encounter with a sharp instrument.

We shall consider each of these actions in turn looking at both the origin of their adoption and also the purpose which they currently serve in teaching a Mason about the Society that he is now about to join.

1. Making sure that the candidate has neither metal nor valuable items on his person.

This is one item of his preparation about which mention will be made in the ceremony that follows and hence it may seem to need less explanation than the others. What is behind it, however, can only be fully appreciated when we recognize the situation in which this practice first appeared in Freemasonry. It was in the days of a Mason's Guild Lodge when the candidates were those who were not ordinary working men but Freemen of a city or borough and who qualified as Fellows of some trade. They were, because of that very status in society, men who already had the means to run a business, could employ apprentices and qualify for the offices of government in the local community. We are not with men in the setting of a working lodge on a building site but in an finely furnished room of a guildhall or better-class inn. These men come in some of their best clothing expecting to be admitted to what they are sure is the company of their equals who are also the established trades folk of the locality. They already know that to join this company is a not inexpensive business and they are prepared and able to pay their dues. They have therefore to learn an early lesson. Entry to Freemasonry is not something you can buy. If you are to be admitted to this Fraternity the most important asset is yourself and not your bank balance, your jewellery or your gold watch. It is therefore essential that on your initial entry to a Lodge you should be seen to be 'without your normal possessions' and relying on your own character, as a man 'of good report', for your acceptance.

There is something else. Just as you cannot buy your way into this company neither can you force your way into it. If you were accustomed to wear a sword or carry a dagger, as a gentleman might by the latter 17th century, then this too has to be removed so that you will not be tempted to rely on that part of your normal attire to assist your entry. It is when we consider this background to our practice that we fully appreciate the words at the North-east corner, “to evince to the brethren that you had neither metal nor valuable substance about you for if you had the ceremony of your initiation thus far must have been repeated”.

We can now see why, because any variation in this requirement casts doubt over the attitude with which a candidate has entered our midst.

2. In considering the re-arrangement of an applicant's clothing we touch, of course, on what is generally regarded as the most unusual, as well as the most distinctive, aspect of becoming a Freemason. The outside world may see fit to use this part of our preparation as a ground for trivializing our whole involvement and there may well be moments when we ourselves pause to wonder whether such a procedure is really necessary. Indeed, unless we again appreciate what is behind such a requirement as having an open shirt, a bared knee and a cord to retain our trousers if a metal belt or braces are denied, we might well think that this is a requirement too far. Whilst of course, most outsiders do not have the benefit of knowing what happens with a bared breast and a bared knee the origin of how we come, somewhat disheveled, to the door of our lodge room is much more important.

What we are being asked to represent here is a working mason of the late Middle ages. He came to work with an open shirt, knee breeches and a cord around his waist and it is that impression which the candidate is now to offer. May I remind you that when, in what were now ex-Guild Lodges, candidates who had not been apprentices in the stonemasons' trade presented themselves the working masons present required that the least that the candidate could do was to come in the age-old manner of working mason apprentices. It is this that we are now to reproduce and whereas in the first accepted lodges there was only one ceremony and one obligation the candidates then came with both knees bare, showing the real condition of his dress. It was only later that the idea of dividing up the ceremonies led to one leg exposed in the apprentice and the other in the Fellowcraft. If we are ever challenged in future about the way in which we entered Freemasonry a short history lesson may be in order.

3) Yes, but why, if what you have just said is true, do we have this next preparation of a slipper on one foot? Surely that has nothing to do with the way in which working masons were dressed? it hasn't. This practice was begun in the days when there was a lodge attached to the Mason's trade guild. This was from the time of Queen Elizabeth I when what we call 'symbolic ritual' was beginning to be created. All this early ritual was based on stories and events taken from the Bible which, let us remember, was now translated into what was then modern English and was much more available for families, schools and individuals to read.

The story from which this incident of a slipper comes in the Book of Ruth which, by the way, was also the portion of the Bible at which it was eventually opened when a Lodge met later in the Apprentice degree. It was also the book that spoke about Boaz which was again appropriate as the eventual password for the First Degree. The story goes that when Boaz wanted to make Ruth part of his family he made his way to the gate of the town where the heads of the families met. There he took off one of his slippers and handed it to the head of the family of Naomi in which Ruth had become a member. When the head of the family accepted the slipper it meant that he approved of the person named leaving his family and joining that of the person whose slipper it was. So Ruth became the wife of Boaz, or probably one of his wives. A slipper given was the sign of joining another family. That is what is now to happen to the candidate. The lodge hands over a slipper and the candidate by accepting it agrees to become the member of this new family of the lodge.

The slipper also means something else as some early rituals show. The question was once asked, "What is that which you are wearing?" The answer was, "An old shoe of my mother's" and the meaning of that exchange was that the candidate was recognizing that from the start of his Masonic career he was indebted to his new Mother Lodge for something needed in his Initiation. He is at once reminded of the bond that is being formed between him and his new Masonic family. You can now see that what we do by way of preparation is not just playing at games or haphazard. It all has a meaning but unless we understand that meaning it may seem pure foolishness. That is why people outside Masonry are so puzzled at grown men doing such things.

4)The reason why the candidate is hoodwinked or blindfold follows very naturally from what has just been explained. It is true that some explain the blindfold as being necessary so that the candidate should not see the interior of a lodge. or the members gathered there. before he has committed himself by an obligation to confidentiality. That may have been one of the original reasons though nowadays, when possible candidates are invited to Ladies Evenings or to meetings with the lodge members and ladies present for a lecture that is hardly a good enough reason for the continuing practice.

The main reason for a blindfold is so that from the very outset we can both test and create the candidate's full reliance and trust in those whom he cannot see and almost certainly cannot know. The candidate is asked at the very start of his journey into the lodge in whom he puts his trust. The answer expected, and which this author believes should be able to be given freely and without prompting, is 'In God'. Yet we cannot see God and our very trust is therefore being tested.. In exactly the same way the W.M. tells him that he may with confidence follow his leader, whom he cannot see, and nothing will happen that he need be afraid of. This is the first step in becoming a trusting member of the very same Lodge that has given him his slipper. Even before many words are spoken we are teaching our candidate the lesson of what being a Brother really means.

5) He also has a cabletow placed around his neck. Here we may feel a little more certain as to what this is meant to teach. After all there will be a moment before long when the W.M. explains that such an item round his neck 'would have rendered any attempt at retreat equally fatal'. Yes, it is true that the cord around his neck does link up with the old type of penalty which is not now administered but only explained. What interests me is that it is not called a rope, a cord or a halter. It is called a 'cabletow' which is a maritime term and seems so out of place in a society which derives from men who built structures on land. Medieval masons used ropes and cords and halters for their cart animals so why should we now have a 'cabletow' put round the neck of an apprentice Freemason?

The answer is very significant. It connects with the same reasoning behind the use of 'doves' on the top of most Deacons' wands. What we see here is a very ancient connection with the Bible story of Noah and the Ark. Without going into great detail here we should know that ancient Freemasons were called 'the sons of Noah' because all the knowledge acquired by Adam was supposed to have been kept in the Ark when the Flood came and so those who were able to receive the ancient knowledge were the sons of Noah after the flood subsided. The idea of the Ark as the ship that carried all those who obeyed and trusted God to safety was strongly believed in the Middle Ages. That is why the main part of the church buildings that masons constructed was called a 'nave' which comes from the Latin word for a ship. Moses too created an Ark to contain the things that brought the Israelites from Egypt in safety and that Ark at last was placed in King Solomon's temple. Perhaps you can now see the connection with us as Freemasons. The idea of Noah as the father of knowledge and trust in God continued That is why we have cabletow from his Ark and why, also, the old form of the penalty spoke of being buried in the sands of the sea a cabletow's length from the shore.

The cabletow round the new Mason's neck is to teach him that he is setting out on a journey into the unknown as Noah did and if he should fail then he will be lost at sea. The doves of Noah on the Deacons' wands are meant to be messengers of hope to the members of a Mason lodge.

6) As he enters the lodge room for the first time the candidate is gently prodded with the point of a sharp object. This is part of another ancient practice which required that any candidate for the trade of a mason had to have all his faculties. To test these we still ask whether the candidate can see anything. We test his hearing by asking a question & making knocks. We know he can walk because he is asked to follow his leader and we know he can feel because we now touch his flesh. In older days, as in some Scottish lodges still, he would have smelt incense on the central pedestal. Thus is his preparation complete. He is a 'fit and proper person' to be admitted into a lodge of brother Masons whom he can trust and who trust him.

The practices we follow are not meaningless & odd. They are ancient and significant. Let us keep them but let us also explain them.

Prepared by:

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