

A Freemason's 33rd Degree Initiation

Excerpt from Jim Shaw's book: *The Deadly Deception*, pp. 99 - 109

INTO THE LIGHT

The hurricane came and went without any harm to us. But the one within me continued to gather force. It seemed strange, from my point of view, for all the people around me seemed calm. Even the doctor was no longer speaking much to me about the Lord, for I wasn't seeing him regularly. Bonnie was quietly supportive, but we really didn't say much about it. Mike and my other friends went on with life. It was "business as usual" around me, but definitely not that way inside of me.

THE HIGHEST MASONIC DEGREE

Easter was approaching and one quiet morning I was at home recuperating from the second operation when the doorbell rang. It was a special delivery letter from the Supreme Council in Washington, notifying me that I had been selected for the 33rd Degree.

I could hardly believe it was true! This honor is one most Masons never even think of receiving. It was too much, too far out of reach, beyond limits of reality. It was unreal to think I had actually been selected. It was an honor just to be considered for this ultimate degree and I had actually been selected, chosen by that small and powerful group, the Supreme Council of the 33rd Degree.

I called Bonnie to share the good news with her. In talking with her, I surprised myself by asking her if she thought I should accept it "What a strange thing to ask her," I thought. But before I could contemplate it she said, "Why, sure you should accept it. You have worked so hard for so long to get there - by all means you should accept it."

So I returned my acceptance immediately and began making plans for the trip.

I MADE IT ON MY OWN

With plenty of time to reflect, I thought about my long climb up the mountain of Masonry in search of light. I thought about the odds against anyone's ever making it to the 33rd Degree. I realized that in my case the odds have been even greater. I had made it by hard work and dedication alone. Some men have an edge on selection because of their wealth, political power or prominence. I had none of these.

Like the day I had carried the man all the way to the top of "Shaw Hill" between Camp Butner and Raleigh, I had made it to the top of the Masonic mountain because I was willing to make the effort required and refused to quit. Thinking of this, I felt particularly good about it and wished my mother could know.

I had come a long way since leaving the front gate that terrible day so many years ago. I had come the distance with no help from Uncle Irvin. Who would have thought that the lonely walk, begun so many years ago by that frightened

13-year-old boy, would have led to this point? I had reached the pinnacle - made it all the way to the top.

Some of the most prominent and influential men in the world would undoubtedly be there to participate when I was given this ultimate degree - for me - little Jimmy Shaw, who had gone to work at age five and made it alone since age 13. They would be there to give the 33rd Degree to me. It was really a bit difficult to take it all in.

3 DAYS AT THE MOUNTAIN TOP

In order to receive the 33rd Degree it was necessary to go to Washington. D.C. The initiation and related functions were to last three days.

Since Bonnie could participate in practically none of the things I would be doing each day, she decided not to go along. We were both excited as I made preparations to leave. But I was not as excited as I expected to be. The edge was taken off the excitement because, in me, it was mixed with a considerable amount of conviction. Way down deep there was a growing restlessness, an increasing conflict, produced by the things the doctor had been sharing and by all the Scripture I had been reading. Preparing to receive this "ultimate honor" was not as thrilling as it might otherwise have been.

ARRIVING AT THE HOUSE OF THE TEMPLE

I flew into Washington National Airport and took a taxi to the House of the Temple on Northwest 16th Street. Upon arriving at the Temple I was met by a receptionist who asked if I were there to receive the 33rd Degree. I was surprised to find a women in those sacred Masonic precincts, but said that I was and showed her my letter from the Supreme Council. She then told me that in order to receive the degree, I would be expected to make a "minimum donation" of a very large amount of money (at least it was a "very large" amount for me). This took me completely by surprise for there had not been a word about any such "minimum donation" in the letter sent me by the Supreme Council. I didn't carry that much money with me and had left my checkbook at home but was able to borrow the money from one of the other men and gave it to her. We candidates were all unhappy about this unpleasant surprise and grumbled to one another about it, but were not unhappy enough to forsake the degree over it. We were too close to the "top of the mountain" to turn back at that point.

THE TEMPLE ITSELF

The House of the Temple is quite impressive - a bit awesome, really. Standing large, grey and silent on the east side of Northwest 16th Street, between "R" and "S" Streets, it looms very wide and tall from the curb. There is a huge expanse of granite pavement in front of it, including three levels of narrowing steps as the entrance is approached. Flanking the entrance are two Sphinx-like granite lions with women's heads, the neck of one entwined by a cobra and decorated with the "ankh" (the Egyptian symbol of life and deity).

Adorning the neck and breast of the other is an image of a women, symbolic of fertility and procreation. In the pavement, just in front of the tall bronze doors, are two Egyptian swords with curved, serpentine blades and, between the two swords, brass letters, set into stone, saying, "The Temple of the Supreme Council of the Thirty-Third and Last Degree of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite."

Over the tall, bronze doors, cut into the stone, is the statement, "Freemasonry Builds Its Temples in the Hearts of Men and Among Nations." (1)

High above the entrance, partially concealed by stone columns, is an elaborate image of the Egyptian sun god, backed with radiating sun and flanked by six large, golden snakes.

Inside is elegance: polished marble, exotic wood, gold and statuary. There are offices, a library, dining room, kitchen, Council Room, "Temple Room" and a large meeting room. This room is like a luxurious theater, rather elegantly furnished and decorated.

The ceiling is dark blue, with lights set into it to give the appearance of stars. These lights can even be made to "twinkle" like stars in the sky. There is a stage, well-equipped, and it is all very nicely done. But the thing that is most noticeable is the way the walls are decorated with serpents. There are all kinds; some very long and large. Many of the Scottish Rite degrees include the representation of serpents and I recognized them among those decorating the walls.

It was all most impressive and gave me a strange mixture of the sensations of being in a temple and in a tomb - something sacred but threatening. I saw busts of outstanding men of the Rite including two of Albert Pike, who is buried there in the wall.

INTERVIEWED BY THE SUPREME COUNCIL

The first day was devoted to registration, briefings and interviews. We were called into one of the offices, one at a time, and interviewed by three members of the Supreme Council.

When my turn came I was ushered into the office and seated. The very first question I was asked was, "Of what religion are you?" Not long before this I would have answered with something like, "I believe the Ancient Mysteries, the 'Old Religion,' and I believe in reincarnation." However, without thinking at all about how to answer, I found myself saying, "I am a Christian."

Then, to my surprise and theirs, I asked them, "Are you men born again?" The man in charge quickly stopped me by saying, "We're not here to talk about that - we are here to ask you questions."

After they sent me back out I sat down and thought about it. When the next man came out, I asked him, "Did they ask you if you are a Christian?" He said, "Yes, they did."

"What did you tell them?" I asked, and he replied, "I told them 'Hell no, and I never intend to be!'"

Then he said a strange thing to me, "They said I'm going higher," and he left through a different door, looking pleased.

BECOMING A SOVEREIGN GRAND INSPECTOR GENERAL

The second day was the day of the actual initiation, held in the theater-like meeting room. Those of us who were receiving the degree were seated and the ceremony was "exemplified" (acted out in full costume) before us, in the same way that we had performed the lesser degrees of the Scottish Rite all those years. The parts in the exemplification were played by men of the 33rd Degree.

The representative candidate was dressed in black trousers, barefooted, bareheaded and draped in a long, black robe that reminded me of a very long, black raincoat. He had a black cable tow around his neck but was not hoodwinked. During the initiation he was led around the stage, conducted by two men with swords, as the degree was performed for us.

Instructions and signs were given. Upon the altar were four "holy books" (the Bible, the Koran, the Book of the Law and the Hindu Scriptures). At one point the "candidate" was told to kiss the book "of your religion" and, representing us all, he leaned forward and did so. I remembered the First Degree initiation, when I was told to kiss the Bible, and at that moment something came full cycle. It was the final such kiss to be a part of my life.

WINE IN A HUMAN SKULL

When it was time for the final obligation we all stood and repeated the oath with the representative candidate, administered by the Sovereign Grand Inspector General. We then swore true allegiance to the Supreme Council of the 33rd Degree, above all other allegiances, and swore never to recognize any other brother as being a member of the Scottish Rite of Freemasonry unless he also recognizes the Supreme authority of "this Supreme Council".

One of the Conductors then handed the "candidate" a human skull, upside down, with wine in it. "May this wine I now drink become a deadly poison to me, as the Hemlock juice drunk by Socrates, should I ever knowingly or willfully violate the same" (the oath).

He then drank the wine. A skeleton (one of the brothers dressed like one - he looked very convincing) then stepped out of the shadows and threw his arms around the "candidate." Then he (and we) continued the sealing of the obligation by saying, "And may these cold arms forever encircle me should I ever knowingly or willfully violate the same."

The Sovereign Grand Commander closed the meeting of the Supreme Council "with the Mystic Number," striking with his sword five, three, one and then two times. After the closing prayer, we all said "amen, amen, amen," and it

was over.

PROMINENT MEN TOOK PART

There were some extremely prominent men there that day, including a Scandinavian King, two former presidents of the United States, an internationally prominent evangelist, two other internationally prominent clergymen, and a very high official of the federal government, the one who actually presented me with the certificate of the 33rd Degree. Some made only brief appearances; others stayed much longer. However, they didn't do much mixing or socializing with us, except for those whom they already knew. Even though these celebrities weren't extremely "brotherly," it was still quite an experience for me just to be associated with them. It was easily the largest gathering of such prominent and influential men of which I have ever been a part.

The third day there was a banquet to celebrate our becoming "Grand Inspectors General. 33rd Degree." The banquet was a little anticlimactic, at least for me, and I was anxious to get it over with so I could return home. It was good to be a 33rd at last. But it wasn't as exciting or fulfilling as I had thought it would be during all those years in the Craft. I guess this was because of the profound changes going on down deep within me.

I returned home as soon as the 33rd Degree award and related social functions were finished, for it was time for my next appointment with the doctor. After he had examined my eyes he said they were healing fine, that he felt good about the way they were looking, and as usual he spoke with me about the Lord. I told him that I planned to come to his church the next Sunday and that I had been reading the Bible.

Obviously pleased, he said, "Good. Keep studying, and your sight will soon be much better." By this time I knew what he meant - he was speaking of my spiritual sight.

MAUNDY THURSDAY

In the Scottish Rite the Thursday before Easter, "Maundy Thursday," is an important day. On this day we always performed a special service of Communion in the local Scottish Rite Temple. At this time I was Wise Master in the Chapter of Rose Croix and it was my job to preside over the exemplification (dramatization) of the ceremony. I had done this many times and was known for my knowledge of the service and for "doing a good job" of putting it on.

THE WORDS HAD MEANING NOW

On Thursday evening we gathered at our home Temple and dressed for the ceremony. It was always a most solemn occasion and seemed a little awesome, even to those of us who had done it many times.

Dressed in long, black, hooded robes, we marched in, single file, with only our faces partly showing, and took our seats.

There was something very tomb-like about the setting. The silence was broken only by the organ, playing mournfully

in the background, and there was no light except for the little that came through the windows. After the opening prayer (from which the name of Jesus Christ was conspicuously excluded), I stood and opened the service.

As I had done so many times before, I said, "We meet this day to commemorate the death of our 'Most Wise and Perfect Master,' not as inspired or divine, for this is not for us to decide, but as at least the greatest of the apostles of mankind."

As I spoke these words that I had spoken so many times before, I had a strange and powerful experience. It was as if I were standing apart, listening to myself as I spoke, and the words echoed deep within me, shouting their significance. They were the same words I had spoken so many times before, but had meaning for me now. They made me sick, literally ill, and I stopped.

The realization of what I had just said grew within me like the rising of a crescendo. I had just called Jesus an "apostle of mankind" who was neither inspired nor divine! There was a silent pause that seemed to last a very long time as I struggled with a sick smothering within.

When I was finally able, I continued with the service and we gathered around a large table across the room in marching order. The table was long, shaped like a cross, and covered with a red cloth which was decorated down the center with roses.

A BLACK COMMUNION

Once we were assembled at the table, I elevated (lifted high) the plate of bread, took a piece, put my hand on the shoulder of the man in front of me, gave him the plate and said, "Take, eat, and give to the hungry."

This continued until all had partaken of the bread. Then I lifted up the goblet of wine, took a sip, and said, "Take, drink, and give to the thirsty."

Again, this continued until all had partaken of the wine.

Then I took the bread, walked over to the first row of spectators and served it to the man previously chosen for the honor of representing the rest of the Lodge

As I handed it to him I again said, "Take, eat, and give to the hungry."

In like manner I served the wine to him saying, "Take, drink, and give to the thirsty," and he sat down.

After this we took our places at the table shaped like a cross and sat down. The setting was dark, our long, sweeping robes were solid black, our faces nearly concealed in the hoods, and the mood was one of heavy gloom. The Christ-less prayers and the hymns we sang fit right in. The one word that would describe the entire event would be "black." It was, indeed, a Black Communion - a strange Black Mass.

EXTINGUISHING THE CANDLE

There was a large Menorah (candlestick with seven candle holders) in the center of the room, with seven candles now burning.

Standing again, I said, "This is indeed a sad day, for we have lost our Master. We may never see him again. He is dead! Mourn, weep and cry, for he is gone."

Then I asked the officers to extinguish the candles in the large Menorah. One by one they rose, walked to the center of the room, extinguished a selected candle and left the room.

Finally, with only the center candle still burning, I arose, walked sadly to the Menorah and extinguished the last candle - the candle representing the life of Jesus, our "Most Wise and Perfect Master." We had dramatized and commemorated the snuffing out of the life of Jesus, without once mentioning his name, and the scene ended with the room in deep silent darkness. I walked out of the room, leaving only the darkness and the stillness of death.

Once again, the single word best to describe it would be "black."

All through the service I was shaking and sick. I have never felt so sad. I had stumbled over the words but, somehow, I made it to the completion of the ceremony and went back to the dressing room. I still didn't know much about praying but felt that I had been sustained by the Lord through it all.

THE FINAL PARTING

Back in the dressing room we hung up our black, hooded robes, put our street clothes back on and prepared to leave. Less than two hours had passed since I arrived. But what had happened in that period of time had changed my life forever.

Still sick in my heart, I changed clothes without a word to anyone. The others asked me what was wrong. But I couldn't reply.

They reminded me that I had acted as Wise Master so many times before, that I was known for my smooth

performance of it, and they asked what had gone wrong.

I was choking on the awful reality of what we had said and done, the way we had blasphemed the Lord, and the evil, black mockery we had made of His pure and selfless death. With weeping welling up within me. I could only shake my head in silence and walk out.

Mike was waiting for me at the door, expecting to get a ride home, and he asked, "What's the matter, Jim? Are you sick?"

Finally able to speak, I quietly replied, "No, Mike, I'm just sick of all this."

"IT ISN'T RIGHT"

I started down the wide steps in front of the large Scottish Rite Temple, realization and conviction growing within me, reached the bottom step and stopped. Turning around, I looked back at the huge, granite building and slowly studied the words, carved in the stone across the top of the entrance: "ANCIENT AND ACCEPTED SCOTTISH RITE OF FREEMASONRY."

Something came clearly into focus in my understanding and I made a decision. This crisis point in my life, one which had required so many years for me to reach, passed in seconds. The truth was revealed and the choice was made - a choice that would be the difference between darkness and light, death and life, one that would last for eternity. Looking up at those words I had walked under so many times, words of which I had been so proud, I spoke to myself out loud. It was as if I were the only man in the world as I heard myself say, slowly and deliberately, "It isn't ancient, it isn't Scottish, it isn't free, and it isn't right!"

INTO THE LIGHT

I turned away and walked into the parking lot, knowing that I would never return. As I walked into the deepening darkness of that springtime night, I was walking into the growing light of the living God. As the natural darkness closed around me, the supernatural light welled up within me. With every step I took, as the Temple receded behind me, I was more free.

"I will never return," I thought with each step. "I will never return, I will never return...."

The decision was made, the die was cast. From that night onward I would serve the true and living God, not the Great Architect of the Universe. I would exalt and learn of Him, not Osiris, Krishna or Demeter. I would seek and follow Jesus, not the will--the-wisp of "hidden wisdom."

I was walking, after such a long time, out of the darkness and into the light.

Footnote

¹ This statement is an interesting contradiction with the Temple it adorns, as well as with the thousands of other such Masonic temples built around the World at a total cost of many billions of dollars.

A PERSONAL WORD FROM JIM

As this true story is closed, I would be greatly remiss if I did not make it clear that in my pre-Christian life I truly loved Freemasonry. I loved the men with whom I was associated in the Lodge and the men with whom I worked so hard in the degrees and bodies of the Scottish Rite. Most of all, I was so very sure that I was doing what was right and pleasing in the sight of the Great Architect of the Universe.

Never in all my years of dedicated service to Masonry did anyone in the Lodge witness to me about the love and saving grace of Jesus. The Lodge attended a church once each year as a group. Each time the pastor (who was himself a Mason) would introduce us to the congregation and then exalt the Craft, telling them about all our wonderful works. We usually left the church thinking of how wonderful we were and feeling sorry for all those in the church who were not Masons, participating in all our good deeds.

After having been witnessed to by my ophthalmologist for some time I read those simple, wonderful words of Jesus, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, he that believeth on me hath everlasting life." These words, so short and so sweet, went right through my heart. I looked in the Bible for more and I found blessed assurance everywhere I looked. Jesus the Christ, the Son of God, really loved me as a real Brother! He will do the same for you.

- Jim Shaw