

THE DOORWAY OF FREEMASONRY

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PREFACE

The following pages seek to do something towards explaining the origin and meaning of the word "Tyler", and also to describe the duties that appertain to the official who guards the doorway.

In olden times, the Tyler was a picturesque character, and the symbolism of his office was not always appreciated. I hope what I have been able to glean from bygone records may be of real interest to members of the Craft.

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The Tyler is the last official who is invested with authority at the ceremony of installation, and the words which are addressed to him by the presiding officer may serve as a text upon which to hang a few remarks on the office, its history and its functions.

Brother Tyler, says the Installing Master, I commit the Sword into your hands to enable you effectually to guard against the approach of cowans and eavesdroppers, by which we are reminded we ought to prevent the approach of every unworthy thought or deed, and to preserve a conscience void of offence towards God and towards man.

Now, the first question that is likely to suggest itself to the student of masonry is, "What is the meaning of the somewhat strange title that is applied to the doorkeeper of a lodge?" And he will find it rather difficult to get a convincing answer. Like many other things in masonry the title appears to be Scottish in its origin, and most authorities are vague in their explanations. If we consult "The Pocket Lexicon of Freemasonry," compiled by Bro. W. Morris who boasts the Eighteenth Degree and describes himself as a "Past Inspector General of the Royal and Select Masters" we shall be told that a Tyler is

"an officer of the Lodge whose duty it is to keep off all cowans and intruders from masonry, and to see the candidate for masonry comes properly prepared.."

It seems a poor achievement for a man who has climbed to the Eighteenth Degree to have acquired a stock of Masonic lore so slender as that indicated by such a definition. Any Entered Apprentice could probably tell us as much. If we turn to Lloyd's "Encyclopedic Dictionary" we find that the main word is "tile," which is defined as "the door in Freemason and other lodges," and the compiler tells us that the etymology of the word is doubtful. The dictionary says that, used as a verb, the word in Freemasonry means "to guard against the entry of the uninitiated by placing a tiler at the door", and that the phrase "to tile a lodge" means, figuratively, to keep secret what is said or done. All this does not carry us very far. The Rev. A.F.A. Woodford, author of "Kenning's Masonic Cyclopaedia," says that the word comes from "teglator," the Latin term for a workman who lays tiles, and Albert Mackey in his "Lexicon" says:--

As in operative masonry, the tyler, when the edifice is erected, finishes and covers it with the roof, so, in Speculative Masonry, when the Lodge is duly organized, the Tyler closes the door, and covers the sacred precincts from all intrusion.

I must confess that I have some difficulty in following the argument that the man who guards a door is connected with the man who covered a roof. To me there seems no natural connection between them and I think we must look elsewhere for the origin of the designation. In olden Scots the word "tile" had a wider meaning than that of merely referring to the roofing of a house. To tile a thing was to cover, or hide, or keep it secret, and in this sense – without any reference whatever to the covering of a roof -- it quite appropriately applies to the intention of Freemasons to guard their mysteries from the uninitiated. If this be correct, the masons would find that the most direct way to secure secrecy was by keeping the lodge lockfast, and in process of time the man whose special duty it was to attend to the door -- the man who tiled it -- would come to be known as the tiler.

But there are two other possible explanations both of which I submit with all deference, and rather as contributions to the discussion than as final pronouncements. One is that the word may be derived from the calling of the man who filled the position; and the other is that it may have originated from one of the important duties which he discharged.

To begin with, we must bear in mind that the office is the humblest in the Lodge, and was invariably assigned to a poor brother who was recognized as in need of the salary attached to it. Now, in many of the old operative lodges, tilers were associated with masons because theirs was an allied trade; but I presume the tilers would always be few in number, and probably were very poorly paid. My theory is that the masons, none of whom may have been anxious to become the servant of the others, may have bestowed the salaried office upon one of the tilers partly because he followed a different occupation and partly because he needed the remuneration which went with it. If this theory should happen to be the correct one, the origin of the word "tiler" instantly appears.

My other explanation is connected with the proverbial phrase, "It takes nine tailors to make a man." If we translate that into Scots it becomes "nine tilers to make a man," and it is worth while looking into the origin of the saying. It is believed to have nothing to do with the knight of the needle; but to refer to the tolling of a bell in the case of death. Formerly at the death of a man the tolling bell was rung thrice three tolls; while at the death of a woman it was rung only three times two tolls. Hence nine tolls indicated the death of a man. Halliwell gives telled-told, and a tolling-bell is a teller. In regard to "make," it is the French word "faire", as "On le faisait mort, that is some one gave out or made known that he was dead." One of the principal duties of the tyler in earlier days was to warn brethren to attend the funerals of deceased craftsmen. Thus in a very practical sense he gave out or made known that a brother was dead. Like the bell he became a "teller," and it may be that in this way his office got its name.

I have not discovered when the word was first used in Freemasonry, but its introduction is comparatively modern, for the Tyler of to-day is the descendent of the "officer of bygone years. In all Scottish burghs there was the town's officer who carried out the instructions of the provost; there was the guildry officer who obeyed the behests of the Dean of the Guildry and his council who represented the merchants of the burgh; and each incorporated Trade, or association of Trades had its officer who attended upon the Convener and his Court. One of the trades of all the burghs was the masons -- I mean the operative masons -- and this trade, like the others, had its officer. When it shed its purely operative character, and assumed the complexion of modern Freemasonry, it retained its officer who has descended to our own time as the familiar tyler.

But long after Speculative Freemasonry came into popularity, the door-keeper continued to be known as the "officer," and this, I think, proves that the designation "tyler" is of comparatively recent use. He was a picturesque character in the good old days just as, sometimes, his fellow-officers of the town, and guildry, and trades were and continue to be. At Stirling the town's officer is clad in scarlet coat and trousers, white stockings, shoes with silver buttons, and a cocked hat. The beautiful and picturesque raiment is said to be of French origin introduced by Mary of Guise about the middle of the sixteenth century. The burly officer is a gorgeous personage to look upon, and there is a tradition that when some distinguished aristocrats visited the town they bowed most obsequiously to him under the impression that he was the provost of the burgh! The Guildry officer was clad in green coat and trousers with white stockings and black shoes with silver buckles. His attire was completed by a silk hat encircled with a gold lace band. The Trades officer also was garbed in a striking fashion. What is true of Stirling is true of many other burghs, and most likely accounts for the fact that the Tyler of the Mason Lodge was often very grotesquely clad. For instance, we find from the records of "Mary's Chapel" No. 1, that in 1770 that Lodge decided the Tyler

"should get a suite of Light Blew Cloathes suitable to the collour of Cloathes suitable to the collour of the Lodge Ribbons, with a silver Lace round the Neck and Cuffs; also a Hatt with Silver Lace, Button, and Loop."

This raiment continued to adorn the Tyler for over forty years, and must have added a touch of colour to Masonic processions of the period. In 1813 the question of renewing the officer's dress came before the Lodge when it was

Agreed that a blue coat and a cocked hat, richly trimmed with gold lace, should be purchased for the tyler to be worn at the procession on St. Andrew's Day.

But this raiment appears commonplace beside the gorgeous uniform of the Tyler of Lodge Scoon and Perth. In 1745 the brethren of that lodge lamented that their officer, being "a poor man," frequently attended the meetings in torn clothes, and instructed the Treasurer to procure him a new coat. This doubtless made him respectable for the time being, but in the beginning of the nineteenth century -- probably copying the example of Mary's Chapel -- the brethren yearned for something distinctive. And nothing less than the style of a Grand Turk would satisfy them. The Treasurer and a committee were appointed "to get the dress done in a masterly" fashion. It consisted of white trousers -- which were washed from time to time at a cost of sixpence -- a royal blue velvet tunic with a light blue vest on which were embroidered in white the name and number of the Lodge. There was also a royal blue cloak trimmed with ermine, and the headgear was a feathered turban. To add to the ferocity of the Tyler's appearance a pair of moustaches were supplied, and at a later date a beard was added. Armed with a curved sword of ample dimensions, the functionary looked a very formidable person to be regarded with fear and awe.

I have no doubt that many other Scottish lodges attired their tylers in distinctive dress. In examining the minute books of Lodge Ancient, Dundee, I found that an inventory taken on 2nd January, 1812, included a suit of Tyler's clothing which consisted of a coat, vest, kilt and bonnet. No particulars are given as to colour or style, but on 3rd January 1816, a bonnet was produced for the use of the Tyler. The Committee were highly pleased with it, and agreed to purchase at a cost of thirteen shillings sterling from which one may conclude that it was no ordinary piece of head-gear.

The duties of the officer of tyler in Jedburgh in the middle of the eighteenth century fell to the youngest apprentice, evidently on the same principle which provided that the youngest tailor should "carry the goose." But the youngest apprentice could compound by paying sixpence a year so long as he remained last entrant, and that he generally did so is seen in the fact that the Lodge had a regular officer who drew the amazingly important "sallery" of half-a-crown per annum! Fifty years later in the same lodge, William Cook, an auctioneer by profession, bound himself to act as officer for three years in consideration of the gratis entry of his son. At Dundee the Tyler had more substantial emoluments. The brethren of St. David's Lodge, who were chiefly business and professional men, contributed one shilling each per annum to the officer, and in addition he had a recognised scale of perquisites from every new member. And he got a dram along with the others. The expenditure for 1776 includes "one shilling on eight different occasions for a bottle of punch to the tyler."

At the present time the Tyler, practically speaking, is the only paid official of a lodge. The Secretary and Treasurer receive honoraria from time to time, and the Master has his labours recognised when he leaves the chair. But all these things are in the goodwill of the brethren. Not so with the Tyler. The nature of his work debars him almost wholly from mixing in the social life of the interior of the lodge and this, together with the fact that, in former times, he was more or less the personal servant of the R.W.M., of the

deacon as the R.W.M. used to be called in operative masonry, led to his being paid for his services. To-day, as a general rule, the Tyler's remuneration takes the form of a fixed sum -- usually a shilling -- for every initiate. This is not always a fair way of payment for, if, in the course of a year, there are few candidates the Tyler's wages are reduced though his work may not be greatly lessened. But the system has all the authority of age -- is, indeed, one of the ancient landmarks of Masonic finance -- and none but bold men would dare to suggest an alteration.

I find that, in former times, while the system was the same, the sum paid was considerably larger. The ancient lodge or craft of operative masons in Dundee who received a charter of incorporation from the Town council in 1659 appointed six brethren to frame rules and regulations. These byelaws, which were duly approved by the Lodge, set forth,

"every entered apprentice shall pay to the officer 6s 8d at his entry and when he is passed 13s 4d, and when he is admitted free master 13s 4d."

These figures, of course, refer to money Scots which was only a twelfth of the value of money sterling.

When we come down to Speculative Freemasonry we find the sums much reduced though here it is money sterling and not money Scots which regulates affairs. St. David's Lodge (No. 78) which was instituted in 1759 charged an initiation fee of £2 5s, of which sum the officer received 1s 6d. when a candidate was initiated and 1s when he was raised. The circumstance that he got nothing when the member was passed is probably explained by the fact that, as a rule, a member was passed and raised on the same evening.

When Thistle Operative (No. 158) came into existence in 1785, it introduced a new feature into Masonry in Dundee, and added to the duties of the Tyler. It set up a benefit section, very similar to the work now discharged by Friendly Societies, and undertook to see deceased brethren properly and decently interred. One of the byelaws provided that the brethren in town and suburbs were to "attend the funeral in clean clothes," under the penalty of sixpence each if they could not give a proper excuse. The officer's duty was to summon them to attend, and for this he was "paid his day's wages off the Lodge."

In one respect the Tyler is the equal of the master and in another he is, indeed, the Master's superior. Both are equal in respect that each receives a gratis invitation to any social function in connection with the Lodge. The reasons for this are very different. As a rule in Speculative Freemasonry in bygone days, the duties of Tyler were undertaken by some brother who was not too well endowed with worldly goods, while the honour of Master was enjoyed by some lord or earl who looked in upon the lodge only at long intervals. Naturally this figure-head was expected to grace the annual festival, but the request for his attendance would be put forward with becoming humility and his presence

regarded as a favour. Consequently no suggestion of payment for admission would be made; and on the other hand the Master would doubtless spend his money very freely during the night. The Tyler was at the other end of the social scale. The comfortable burgesses and county gentlemen who formed the lodges would never dream of asking their humble officer to be out of pocket, and so he got his place at the table without money and without price. The Tyler is the superior of the master in this respect that while no brother can be R.W.M. of more than one lodge at the same time without dispensation from Grand Lodge, the Tyler can be -- and frequently is -- officer of several lodges.

So far I have dealt with the Tyler from what I may call the material point of view -- as the very practical officer of a very matter-of-fact institution. But as a person stationed at the outside of the door of a Masonic Lodge he has another meaning which masons cannot afford to forget. A Lodge is regarded as a little centre of light amid the darkness of the world; a little haven of good in the wilderness of evil; a little oasis of sweetness and love in the desert of life. The Tyler with his drawn sword is a perpetual reminder to us that nothing that is unworthy should be permitted within the sanctuary of the Lodge. Bro. J.T. Lawrence says there was a time when the Tyler's sword was "wavy" in shape, and he adds that it was thus made in allusion to the flaming brand placed at the east of the Garden of Eden, which turned every way to keep the way of the Tree of Life. When one remembers how rich our institution is in symbolism one may be inclined to accept Bro. Lawrence's statement as correct. It gives a dignity and an importance to the Tyler and adds a grandeur to the Lodge of which he is the keeper.

The Tyler is armed with the sword for defence. He is to guard against the approach of cowans and eavesdroppers. He is to remain firm and do his duty. It is never his place to take the offensive. He waits the assault of the enemy and repels. In this connection it is maintained that the Tyler should never relinquish hold of the sword so that he may always symbolise the need for every Mason to be perpetually on his guard against the approach of unworthy thoughts and deeds.

It follows from all this that the Tyler should be a commanding figure at the door of the Lodge. Armed with his sword he should impress the postulant who seeks admission and when, later, that admission is gained, the candidate should learn just what the Tyler's sword and office mean. They mark, as it were, the dividing line between the Lodge and the world. In a moral and spiritual sense they constitute the barrier between right and wrong. It is our common faith that the day will come when the light of truth shall gladden the whole earth, and our constant aim is towards the diffusion of that light. But so long as any territory remains under the power of darkness, so long as the Light of Masonry is not shed in the hearts of all men, so long will there be a barrier, so long will there be a dividing line, and so long will there be need for a Tyler with a drawn sword to guard the threshold of our faith.