

THE ROUGH LIFE

A rare view of our Third degree is through the eyes of the Ruffians. Too often they are dismissed as simple foils for the progress of our hero, the candidate. Yet if we stand in their shoes a few minutes, we may be able to appreciate teaching aspects of this degree we have not considered before.

First of all, I am sure life as a workman on the Temple was not that wonderful. It was, after all, hard work. Lifting and positioning heavy stones is not great therapy for the back and spine. The process of creating ashlar was chiefly one of hammering- first with the heavy sledge on wedges for splitting, then with the stone hammer against the chisel to slowly chip away the stone. Just imagine how many times the chisel must be struck to square out an ashlar of say 2x2x4 feet! You try lifting and striking with a hammer for several unrelenting hours and see how wonderful life feels to you.

I realize they received payment, but with large extended Jewish families I'm sure any surplus was quickly eaten up. What made them Ruffians as different from the other Craftsmen was of course not the circumstances of their life, but their internal attitudes about it. They blamed the rich and powerful for their lowly lot, and over time it is obvious their resentment grew into anger and feelings of revenge. How they must have looked at Hiram as he passed in his fine clothes, surrounded by slaves, a darling of the King! If they could just wrench from his lips the great Secret of Life, then how everything would be different! I imagine their thoughts differed little from all communists down through the ages, only they were ahead of their time and could convince only two others of the rightness of their views.

Instead of working to acquire Wisdom, they sought to attain it by force. As such, they exemplify ignorance making ignorant choices, driven by a greed which has opened up the doors of powerful emotions they cannot control. They allowed their minds to become completely overwhelmed by desire and longing, and were propelled by their suffering to an act of murder. This is not an exotic story. Lots of people all around us have minds totally given over to anger and desire, and are willing to do almost anything to get what they want. The outcome was, however, not as they may have envisioned. Instead of reducing their pain, their suffering greatly increased. Forced from their daily routines, they had to abandon loved ones and family ties only to end up without food or water among some rocks in the desert.

When the Craftsmen go to get the Ruffians, it is traditional in Vermont to have them resist with all their might. In my early years we were taught to tie the preparation room door closed and hide downstairs. All this is great fun, but hardly represents the real attitude of the Ruffians. Had they not just voiced their "imprecations?" Too often stumbled through without thought, these are the plaintive wails of souls at the end of their wits, the utter voice of despair. To say that they express regret for their actions is a massive understatement. They know they are guilty, feel the

weight of that guilt, and freely express it before the King. At this point they are in fact symbols of repentance for the deeds of ignorance. I know I've felt this way- haven't you?

Their repentance, however, does not lead to absolution. They have killed not just a great and good man, but the Mason's Word, the very secret they had sought. I can see their exhausted kin with tear streaked cheeks recoil from the fearful sentence projected from Solomon's lips: then you shall die. It makes a comment on whether our choices in life are immutable or not. Certainly, we have the freedom to do with our life what we want. We do not, however, have the freedom to alter the least act or even thought once it is done, once it has flown. Everything we do to others becomes forever a part of us. We may escape the consequences for a while, but we have created our own imprecations.

Well just think of these things the next time you watch the Ruffians unwind their harsh fate. In some ways, we all are Hiram, struck down in the midst of his duty. But in other ways we are the Ruffian whose seething resentment of others is vented in anger, and lost in our own folly.

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