

A FANTASY OF THE REGIUS POEM'S ORIGIN

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Today, I'll ask that you accompany me on a fantasy - a Masonic fantasy, a product of my imagination. Come with me, if you will, back in time, back, back two centuries...four...six centuries...and more...to the year 1389; and over the ocean to the rolling hills and green forests of England as she was then.

How was England then? Well, the borders of the Kingdom extended across the channel and onto the continent of Europe. William of Wykeham, bishop of Winchester, was Lord Chancellor of England as well, and it was said that "Everything was done through him and without him nothing was done." Twenty-two year old Richard II sat upon the Throne, and only this year has begun to assert himself as King. His predecessor and grandfather, Edward III had laid hereditary claim to the Throne of France, prompting The Hundred Year's War between the two countries. That war was in its fifty-second year. A war with Scotland had been simultaneously waged, and the Scot defeat of the English in the battle of Chevy Chase was but a year old. Only in this year was a truce effected between the Kings of England, Scotland, and France.

The idea of nationhood, of a sovereign state, was not yet firm. Men spoke rather in terms of greater or lesser "Lordships." The dominion of a lordship might be a duchy or a county, but it might be gained or expanded or contracted through inheritance, marriage, service to a higher Lord, or in battle. A legacy of older conditions was the right of a Lord to create a lesser lord by a gift recorded in a Charter or Bull. Lordships might even be chartered to a corporation or group, as in a city or the East India Company. And a charter was a document that possessed sovereignty, power, authority in and of itself. When King Henry III informed the local Prior of the Knights Templar that he intended to relieve his cash flow problems by commandeering some of the Templar riches in defiance of the Charter granted them. The reply was: "What sayest thou, O King? Far be it thy mouth should utter so

disagreeable and silly a word ...Thou wilt cease to be king."

Latin and French has given way to Old English as the language of official documents within the past 40 years, and Chaucer has published the first substantial English literature. His fifth book, "Canterbury Tales," was produced in 1387, only two years previously. Chaucer, by the way, has been appointed to superintend the contracting for new work on several cathedrals, included the one at Winchester. One document for the period reads in part:

"Bill of Geoffrey Chaucer, Clerk of the King's Works, to be Chancellor, for the issue of a commission under the Great Seal of Hugh Swayn to purvey stone, timber, tiles, shingles, etc. and to take masons, carpenters, and others for the works at Westminster, Sheen, Kennington, Charing Mews, Byfleet, Coldkennington, Clarendon and Hathelbergh Lodge; and of similar commissions to three others for the works of the Tower of London, Berkhamstead, Childerne Langley, and Eltham. (A.D. 1389 - then a writing and signature in French and traces of a signet.)"

John Wyclif, who translated the Bible into vernacular English and advanced it as the primary source of religious authority, and who was condemned and expelled from Oxford for his efforts, and who railed against the society of Freemasons for assembling to demand higher wages, has been dead for five years.

And over all of Europe, including England, lingered the lasting effects of the dreaded Black Plague which appeared first in the 1340's and recurred periodically thereafter, having last appeared in 1361. Altogether, England's population was reduced almost in half, and the social and economic damage was devastating. Labor of all kinds was in short supply, and artisans in particular were in great

demand. To prevent workmen from demanding high rates of pay for their services, the King has placed a cap on wages of various crafts including Masons. This and other complaints has caused increasing resentment among workers. In fact, artisans in London as well as the peasantry in southern and eastern England became sufficiently incensed to revolt in 1381. To guard against such insurrection, King Edward III prohibited unauthorized assemblies, and his edict was reinforced by his successor Richard II.

Let us proceed now with our fantasy. We alight in the village of Winchester, 65 miles southwest of London, where we find a great deal of activity surrounding the cathedral, already four centuries old by 1389. The central section of the cathedral, both inside and out, is obscured from view by a network of scaffolding, and along one wall is a long shed-like wooden structure which serves as both quarters and a meeting hall for the freemasons at work there. It is known as the Lodge.

We find the Lodge now packed with people, with an overflow into the Cathedral yard. There are Masons and their families, monks and priests, and a few elders of the city. They have been called here by the Master Mason contracted to rebuild the nave of the Cathedral, William Wynford, a professional of some repute who worked also on Winchester College and Windsor Castle. They are to hear out a delegation of the King's men, who bring the disturbing news that Richard II is displeased. At these times of dissention among the workman when it is essential that no plotting against the Crown can be countenanced, he has received word that the Freemasons at Winchester Cathedral have been congregating behind closed doors without a charter or authorization to do so, in contravention of the civil laws concerning assemblies. There is a vehement discussion of the long-standing tradition of the congregation of Masons in their Lodges and at area assemblies, and of the reputation of Masons for loyalty to their Lords. Why, it is asked, have the Lodges at some Cathedral towns continued to meet without interruption or objection from the Throne?

The reply of the King's men creates great excitement, and sends the assemblage into new rounds of heated discussion. They hear that certain Lodges of Freemasons are in possession of copies of a Charter authorizing Freemasons to assemble, a Charter purported to have been granted by King Edwin during the Tenth Century. According to the King's men, a Lodge has been permanently established at York where renovative work on the Cathedral has gone on more or less steadily for centuries, and where the choir reconstruction has been progressing since 1380. Their royal recognition of this and certain other Lodges stems from such documentation.

The problem is discussed for several hours by the Masons and monks at Winchester, and there is general consensus that no effort is too great to attain recognition of their right to assemble in Lodge. It is decided that two of their party will undertake the long ride to York to procure the documentation in question, or a copy thereof. They send assurances that they will conduct no private meetings for 60 days at which time they will again receive the King's agents for further consultations. It is a common judgment that the help of the Bishop of Winchester, the Lord Chancellor, can be depended upon once their problem becomes known. Three swift steeds, one for each rider and a spare, are readied for the journey to York.

Then, the impatient waiting is begun. Meanwhile, a priestly emissary is sent to the Lord Chancellor with news of the plight of the Masons of Winchester, and he returns with Wykeham's sympathetic message approving the actions taken, and assurances of support.

After ten days, a cloud of dust is spotted in the distance along the road to Winchester, and three riders appear. They are greeted by a great crowd, and a loud cheer goes up at the news that the third member of the group is a member of the Lodge at York, and that he has in his custody a copy of the manuscript which the Crown has accepted as a legal Charter for Freemasons to assemble in their Lodges.

But there is yet toil ahead. The York Mason will not release his copy of the Manuscript to any person, even to his brethren of the Craft. He agrees, however, to bring the parchment to the apartment of a clerical monk, who laboriously transcribes the document to produce a copy for the Lodge at Winchester. For many days, he labors on his copy, but he does more than copy. He sets the script to rhyme as he copies it, thereby adding a refinement to the copy that was not found in the original.

The Lord Chancellor is appraised of progress, and upon completion of the new manuscript, arranges a formal ceremony of acceptance of the Charter for the Masons of Winchester on behalf of the King. Plans have been made and cupboards stocked in anticipation of this glad event, and the wives and daughters of the Lodge members lose no time in preparing a great feast of celebration which will last for several days.

And so, a permanent Lodge at Winchester Cathedral is at last founded.

And there, my brethren, ends our fantasy for today.

But it does not end the story of the manuscript. The manuscript is a reality. It exists today in the Library of the British Museum.

While the Masonic fraternity was undergoing a transformation to the speculative craft familiar to us today, the manuscript remained in obscurity. Its first known appearance is in the library of one John Theyer, an antiquary who died in 1673. The library was catalogued, and our manuscript appears on Vol. II, page 200 as: No. 6516, Verses of Morality, in English, entitled "*Institutiones Geometriae secundum Euclidem.*" King Charles II purchased the Theyer library and proceeded to form the First and then the Second Royal Library. A succession of monarchs retained possession of the Theyer library and our manuscript of verse until King George II presented the royal collection to the British Museum in 1757. *The Catalogue of the Manuscripts of the Royal Library* (1734 A.D.) listed it as *A Poem of Moral Duties*.

In the British Museum it lay unnoticed until 1837, when Mr. James O. Halliwell noticed that it was not at all a poem on moral duties, but was in fact, a document prepared for a Lodge of Freemasons. To this day, the manuscript carries the title "The Halliwell Manuscript" in honor of the non-Mason who first recognized its Masonic significance. He discussed it in a paper read to the Society of Antiquarians in 1838-39 A.D. entitled: *On the Introduction of Freemasonry into England*, and published it for public review. The manuscript is also called the Regius Poem to characterize its connection with the Royal Library.

Experts have dated the manuscript to about 1389 or 1390. It is on vellum, in 33 folios gathered on hands of six, except for the last which is eight; 64 pages in all with about 14 lines to a page. It is not a scroll, but a book approximately four and one-half by five inches, and bound in fine leather. Its verse is in the style of a Chaucerian doggerel, and no one but a scholar familiar with that style could make sense of its original version today.

It is the oldest purely Masonic document yet discovered, though it is evidently a copy of one still older, and the first of as many as 2,000 manuscripts now known collectively as The Old Charges. Its high significance to us is its indication of organized Masonic Lodges, using written charters or constitutions, as long as six centuries ago; and the inherent supposition of Lodges long before that from a text describing a craft already very old.

The first 86 lines purport to be a history of our Craft from earth's creation onward. Masonry, the "most honest craft of all" was discovered by Euclid and brought to England during the reign of King Athelstan, who "loved well this craft" and summoned all Masons to a Convention attended by "divers lords, including dukes, earls and barons, knights, squires and many more." They drew up Fifteen Articles and Fifteen Points binding upon all Master Masons and Craftsmen. The manuscript gives advice and instruction on manners, religious duties and morals. It contains, even at this early date, the suggestion of our titles of Master Mason and Worshipful in this modernized passage:

Furthermore yet that ordained he,
 Master called so should he be;
 So that he were most worshipped,
 Then should he be so called.

Masons are exhorted to gather annually or triennially in assembly at such place as might be chosen for further amendment to any faults and to be resworn to keep the Statutes. There follows a great diversity of subjects expounding on the art of Geometry, spiritual subjects some of which seem to be the work of a priest, as well as courtesies of the Lodge and even table manners.

It ends with the words:

AMEN, AMEN, SO MOTE IT BE
 SO SAY WE ALL FOR CHARITY.

The Halliwell Manuscript and its sister Old Charges did not petition the Crown for a Charter, they claimed that a Charter was theirs by right of prior authorization and by right of an origin in antiquity. As we look at them today, their claims may seem fanciful and their histories full of absurdities. But they were meant to serve as Charters, and to explain to non-Masons that the Craft was honorable, that it intended to keep the peace, honor the realm and keep the King's laws, and maintain a due respect for the authority of the Church. They were meant to be legal documents, and they were accepted as such by the Craft, the civil authorities, and the Church. For centuries, no permanent Lodge could be formed without a copy, and new apprentices were obligated upon them. Their use was not confined to English Lodges, for there exists documentation that a version of them was read in the year 1670 to every candidate admired as an Apprentice at the Lodge of Aberdeen, and probably they were used regularly in other Scottish Lodges.

And so we have the fact of this fantastic document, whose import stands on the transition from temporary, moving Lodges to stationary permanent Lodges based upon legal charters or constitutions authorizing them to exist and meet. Without these permanent Lodges, the second transition of the Craft from operative workmen to speculative Masons would have been impossible. We have the

fact of its discovery and preservation. And we have the fact of the era from which it sprung.

Who could help but wonder how that document came about, and where, and in what circumstances? Research led to three or four substantial cathedral renovation and reconstruction projects undertaken during this period. One was at York, where a series of renovations seem to have gone on almost continuously over several centuries. Another was the major project at Winchester. Winchester was chosen as the setting for this contrived scenario because of its interesting connection with Chaucer and with William of Wykeham, and because of its proximity to Gloucester, where the manuscript later surfaced. But it seems equally likely that the original manuscript from which the copy was made came from Winchester, and that the Regius Poem was used at a smaller cathedral nearby.

At any rate, I hope that my imagination has produced a fantasy to spike your interest.

Thank you and good day.

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