

A Masonic Minute

The Lesson of the Third Degree

The several degrees conferred in our Masonic Lodges are object lessons, examples of the core values – integrity, fidelity, honour – that are the basis of the fraternity. None is more profound than that of the Third Degree. It is for this reason that it is known as **‘The Sublime Degree.’**

The pervasive theme of the Degree is **Death**. The Candidate enters a darkened lodge – *‘darkness visible.’* Very early in the ritual reference is made to *‘passing under the shadow of death’* and the legend communicated in the floor work re-enacts the death of the Master. It is a potent reminder that *“Man that is born of a woman hath but a short time to live. He springeth up like a flower and is cut down. In the midst of life we are in death.”*¹

However, I suggest that the real lesson of the Third Degree is not ‘how to die’ but rather **how to live**.

“Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them.” This passage from Ecclesiastes 12: 1 read at the height of the dramatic re-enactment, I suggest expresses the essence of the Sublime Degree.

This is captured poetically in a hymn written by Anna Louisa Coghill in 1854. She was but eighteen years old when she wrote these lines.

Work, for the night is coming,
Work through the morning hours;
Work while the dew is sparkling,
Work ’mid springing flowers;
Work when the day grows brighter,
Work in the glowing sun;
Work, for the night is coming,
When man’s work is done.

Work, for the night is coming,
Work through the sunny noon;
Fill brightest hours with labor,
Rest comes sure and soon.
Give every flying minute,
Something to keep in store;
Work, for the night is coming,
When man works no more.

¹ Book of Common Prayer, Burial of the Dead

Work, for the night is coming,
Under the sunset skies;
While their bright tints are glowing,
Work, for daylight flies.
Work till the last beam fadeth,
Fadeth to shine no more;
Work, while the night is darkening,
When man's work is o'er.²

The Lesson of the Third Degree is "Be thou faithful unto death,"³ and is summed up in the Final Charge when the Master Mason is admonished to "*imitate the example of that celebrated artist whom you have once represented.*"

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² Anna Louisa Coghill (1836-1907) In 1857, Anna's family moved to Canada. They lived first at Pointe-Lévy and then moved in 1858 to Sarnia, where her father continued to work for the Grand Trunk Railway. Around that time, Anna and two sisters, Isabella and Frances, ran a girls' school. Anna returned to England in 1863. The poem was set to music by Lowell Mason in 1864.

³ Revelation 2: 10