

THE LEGEND OF THE SMITH.

Of all the myths that have prevailed among the peoples of the earth, scarcely any has a greater antiquity or a more extensive existence than that of the smith who worked in metals and fabricated shields and swords for warriors or jewelry for queens and noble ladies. Such a myth is to be found among the traditions of the earliest religions, and being handed down uninterruptedly through ages of popular transmission, it is preserved with various natural modifications in the legends of the Middle Ages, from Scandinavia to the most southern limit of the Latin race. Long before this period it may be recognized in the mythology and the folk lore of India, of Greece, and Rome.

Freemasonry in its most recent form, while adopting as a part of its legendary system the story of Hiram Abif, has strangely distorted its true features as exhibited in the books of Kings and Chronicles; and, without any historical authority, transformed the Scriptural idea of a skilled smith into that of an architect and builder. Hence, in the ritual language of Speculative Masonry, the Widow's Son is constantly called "The Builder;" and to him is supposed to have been entrusted the superintendence of the Temple during its construction, and the guidance and control of those workmen—the stone-squarers and masons—who were engaged in the labor of erecting it.

To divest this legend of its corrupt form, and to give to Hiram Abif his true position among the workers at the Temple, cannot affect, in the slightest degree, the symbolism of which he forms so important a part. Whether we make Hiram Abif the Chief Builder and the Operative Grand Master at the Temple of Solomon, or whether we give that position, as is done in some Masonic rites, to Adoniram, who was, however, a tax-gatherer, the symbolism will remain unaffected, because the symbolic idea rests on the fact of a Chief Builder having existed, and it is immaterial to the development of the symbolism what was his true name. The instruction intended to be conveyed in the legend of the third degree must remain intact, no matter whom we may identify as its hero; for he represents truly neither Hiram nor Adoniram, nor any other individual person, but man in the abstract.

It is, however, important to the truth of history that the real facts should be eliminated out of the mystical statements which envelope them. And it will add interest to the system of Masonic ritualism, if we shall be able to trace in it any remnant of that oldest and most interesting of legends, the legend of the Smith, which, as I have said, has so universally prevailed in the most ancient forms of religious faith.

Before investigating the "Legend of the Smith" in reference to Freemasonry, it will be better to inquire into the character of the legend as it existed in the old religions and in the mediæval myths. We may then inquire how this legend, adopted in Freemasonry in its stricter ancient form, became, afterwards, confounded with the legend of a Temple Builder.

If we go back to the oldest of the mythologies, that which is taught in the Vedic hymns of the ancient Aryans, we shall find the fire-god Agni, whose flames are described as being "luminous, powerful, fearful, and not to be trusted."

The element of fire thus worshiped by the primeval Aryans, as an instrument of good or of evil, was subsequently personified by the Greeks. The Vedic hymns, referring to the continual renovation of the flame, as it was once fed by fuel, called Agni, Yavishtha, the ever young. From this the Greeks got their Hephaistos, the mighty workman, the immortal smith, who forged the weapons of the gods, and, at the prayer of Thetis, fabricated the irresistible armor of Achilles. The Romans borrowed from their Aryan ancestors the same idea of the potency of fire, and personified it in their Vulcan, a name evidently derived from the Sanscrit *Ulka*, a firebrand, although a similarity of the sound, has led many etymologists erroneously to deduce the Roman Vulcan from the Semitic Tubal Cain. Indeed, until the modern discoveries in comparative philology, this was the universal opinion of the learned.

Hephaistos, or Vulcan, kindling his forges in the isle of Lemnos, and, with his Cyclops journeymen, beating out and shaping and welding the red-hot iron into forms of spears and javelins and helmets and coats of mail, was the southern development of the Aryan fire-god Agni. "Vulcan," says Diodorus Siculus, "was the first founder of works in iron, brass, gold, silver, and all fusible metals; and he taught the uses to which fire might be applied by artificers." Hence he was called by the ancients the god of blacksmiths.

The Scandinavians, or northern descendants of the Aryan race, brought with them, in their emigration from Caucasus, the same reverence for fire and for the working of metals by its potent use. They, however, created no god of fire, but invented their legends of a skilled smith, beneath whose mighty blows upon the yielding iron swords of marvelous keenness and resistless strength were forged, or by whose wonderful artistic skill diadems and bracelets and jewels of surpassing beauty were constructed. Hence, the myth of a wondrously cunning artisan was everywhere found, and the