

The Three Ruffians of the Third Degree

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At the heart of the third degree mysteries is a legend, in which we learn how three unworthy craftsmen entered into a plot to extort from a famous Mason a secret to which they had no right. This story teaches a great moral lesson and is one that all Masons should take to heart.

The important question we should take from the legend is:

Why is it that evil men, acting from low motives and for selfish aims, have such power to throw the human race into confusion and bring ruin upon all, defeating and ruining the very thing they hope to gain?

If we can't answer questions like this, we can at least ask another that is closer to heart. Since everything in Masonry is symbolic, what or who do the ruffians represent?

Who are the ruffians and what is the legend trying to tell us?

We know the names they are in the mysteries, but what is the truth behind the legend?

What lesson are we to learn from this?

In ancient sun worship, the Ruffians can mean the 3 winter months that plot to murder the beauty and glory of summer, destroying the life-giving heat of the sun.

In Ancient Egypt, it is the drama of Typhon (the spirit of evil), who slays Osiris (the spirit of good), who is then resurrected, rising in triumph over death.

In European Lodges the Ruffians are called the three Assassins. They are associated with the downfall of the Knights Templar and are identified thus: Three renegade Knights falsely accused the Order of vile and evil things, thus aiding King Phillip of France and Pope Clement to abolish The Order and slay its Grand Master Jacques DeMolay.

Those who seek the mysteries in the Bible find meaning in the life and death of Jesus. The three most ruthless ruffians — the Priest, the Politician and the Mob, put him to death outside the city gates. Which of the three is the greatest foe of Humanity is hard to tell, but when they work in concert, as they usually do, there is no crime against man of which they are incapable.

Albert Pike identified the Ruffians as three who are the greatest enemies of individual welfare and social progress as Kingcraft, Priestcraft and the ignorant Mob-Mind. Together they conspire to destroy liberty, without which man can make no advance.

Kingcraft strikes a blow at the throat, the seat of freedom of speech, a mortal wound. Priestcraft stabs at the heart of man, the home of freedom of conscience, a near fatal wound since it puts out the last ray of Divine Light by which man is guided. The ignorant Mob-Mind fells its victim dead with a blow to the brain, which is the throne of freedom of thought.

Of these three, the most terrible, ruthless and brutal is the ignorant Mob-Mind. No tyrant or priest can reduce a nation to slavery and control it unless it is already lost in the darkness of ignorance. This does not mean just a lack of knowledge, but the state of mind in which men refuse (or are afraid) to think, reason or question. When the 'Great Freedoms of the Mind' go, everything is lost.

No lesson can be plainer. If, by apathy, neglect or stupidity, we suffer free speech, free conscience and free thought to be destroyed, the Temple of God will be dark, there will be no designs upon the Trestle board and the result will be idleness, confusion and chaos.

This is a parable of history. Where there is no light of Divine Vision, the altar fire is extinguished. The Bible tells us that the people perish. The people meaning the rational group mind. They become an unthinking mob, where there is no leadership. Chaos comes again, and the people are like ignorant armies striking out in the dark.

The lesson Pike teaches is that the three Ruffians rob themselves even as they rob their fellow craftsmen of the most precious secret. A secret, which can't be extorted, but is only won when we are worthy to receive it. We can't have real personal liberty until we are ready for it, and can only become worthy when we actively pursue the understanding of what it means.

Why do we do evil and mar the temple that is contained within us?

Socrates stated that the chief Ruffian is ignorance. No man in his right mind does evil unless he is so blinded by ignorance that he does not see the right. No man, seeing good and evil side by side, will choose evil unless he is too blind to see its results. An enlightened self-interest would stop him. Therefore, Socrates advises more knowledge, more light and a clearer insight.

Plato said that Socrates was right but he did not delve deep enough. The fact is that men do see the right and wrong clearly, and yet in a dark mood will choose the wrong in spite of knowledge. When the mind is calm and clear, the right is plain. A storm of passion will stir up sediments in the bottom of the mind, clouding up logic with emotion so that clear vision fails. (prejudice)

According to Aristotle, we do not get to the truth of the matter until we admit the possibility, in ourselves and our fellows, of a moral perversity or spirit of sheer mischief, which does wrong, deliberately and in the face of right, for the sake of wrong and for the love of it. Here truly is the greatest Ruffian, a desperate creature who can only be overcome by Divine Help.

Some of us find the same three Ruffians hiding in our own hearts. The ruffians in each of us are Arrogance, Prejudice and Indifference. These have a direct correlation to Pike's idea of what the ruffians represent and it has a great deal in common with the early Greek philosophers. We have to confront and acknowledge them before we can overcome their influence in our lives. The first and most important step is to recognize and admit that they are present in us. The best example I have seen of addressing this idea is the degree work as performed in the Nogales Lodge. The candidate for initiation is brought into the Lodge room with a Blindfold on (one that has a flip up cover) prior to his initiation. He is escorted to the center of the room and the brethren form a circle around him .

The Worshipful Master asks the following question of the candidate:

“Is there anyone here that you can identify as an enemy or a foe?” The candidate is told that if there is, he must make peace with that person before he can become part of the Lodge. He is told that no man can sit in Lodge with an enemy. Peace and harmony must prevail. The candidate is turned in a circle stopping as he faces each and every man in the Lodge and the blindfold is flipped up so that he can see the person in front of him. The question is put to him again and once again he is shown every man in the Lodge. The third time

the question is put to him, the last man he sees is holding a mirror so that the candidate is presented with himself. After the candidate is so enlightened, he is asked if he is ready to forgive his enemy and begin making the journey into light.

The way it was done was especially moving to me as all in the Lodge afterwards surrounded the candidate and pledged to aid and assist in any way they could to facilitate that journey. Afterwards, he is taken out of the Lodge room and prepared for his initiation. The lesson is that without confronting the internal evil that is in all of us, we can not progress towards that perfection we seek. I particularly liked the way it was done.

One final thought. The abuse heaped upon a person does not have to be physical. It can and often is snide comments and remarks about the person. Most of these can't be defended against. The classic is "Have you stopped beating your wife?" Obviously the answer is that you have never beaten her but the question has repercussions. A popular stance among journalists now is that it is not necessary to have been convicted of a crime, The seriousness of the accusations are enough!!

One does not have to break the head of a Brother to be a Ruffian. One can break his heart, spirit or good name. Polite ruffianism goes on around us and is appalling. A brother can be broken by our inactivity and indifference. Only by diligent watchfulness can the Ruffians be defeated.