

The Three-minute Nugget...

Cowans & Eavesdroppers, and Duly and Truly Prepared.

The Tiler's duties include observing the approach of "cowans and eavesdroppers". It's doubtful you'll find the term "cowan" in the dictionary - but "eavesdropper" does appear. "Cowan" is believed to be an old Scottish word though the true origin is unknown. The term "cowan" as used by the Scots was meant to indicate, "A Mason without the word; the apprentice who tries to masquerade as a Master". A more modern usage would be "an ignorant mason who places or lays stones together without mortar, or piles them together into a wall without working them square". The "cowan", may be a Fellowcraft or Entered Apprentice stopped for cause, or the one-time member in good standing who has been dropped for one reason or another. These sometimes try to get past the Tiler. The "eavesdropper" in ancient times was a would-be thief of secrets who listened under the eaves of houses (there was often a space between the wall and roof for ventilation). In order to hear, he had to get close to the wall under the eaves, where he received the water droplets from the roof if it rained - hence, eavesdropper. In modern times, he is the man who might forge a good-standing dues card, or finds one and masquerades as its owner. He is very rare, and few Tilers have ever met him!

In order to be "duly and truly prepared", a candidate for degrees must be hoodwinked. In all systems of initiation, darkness has been a symbol of ignorance; hence, ritual that the eye should not see until the heart has conceived the mysteries of the order. Blindfolding a candidate is symbolic of that state in which he is immersed in intellectual darkness, groping in search for the 'light' found in Freemasonry. It is not so much to keep him from seeing the lodge room, or the officers, or the Brethren, but to make a deep and lasting impression on his mind that:

1. As he was then in darkness, so should he keep the world regarding the secrets of Masonry;
2. His heart might be taught to conceive before his eyes beheld the benefits of our Order;
3. Should he refuse to submit to the forms and customs of that degree, he might be led out of the lodge without discovering even the form thereof.

First, a man has only a certain amount of power to receive impressions; if this power is divided between eye and ear and feeling, it is less strong for many, than if some senses are temporarily blocked. The blindfold emphasizes the words heard; there is more attention paid to ritual when the attention is given to the use of one sense. Secondly, a candidate is more impressed when he is a part of the action of a degree. The more he becomes part of it, the greater the impression. Hoodwinking the candidate singles him out. He is immediately made dependent, and can no longer defend himself. He must rely on a friend. He is made "different" and because he is "different" he becomes, in his own mind, more important. Masonic light is not created anew for each initiate. It's always with the Fraternity, just as the ashlar awaits the chisel of the Master, so does knowledge await the removal of the hoodwink.



...#69 in a series of 'nuggets from the quarries of Freemasonry' SM
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