

The Film
NATIONAL TREASURE

(Italian Title: “Il mistero dei Templari” = “Mystery of the Knights Templar”)

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Please note

First of all, I wish to apologize for any mistakes I might have made in the following text, as English is not my mother-tongue. I have, however, attempted to translate my original Italian text as clearly as possible. Readers are kindly requested to send me any observations and corrections, both about the “form” and the “substance”. Of course, all this is addressed to those who have seen the film, otherwise my words have little meaning.

As for the “substance”, mine are of course personal interpretations, which may be questionable and also exaggerated or even quite wrong. Please consider the fact that I may have been misled and/or may have misunderstood something due, in part, to my lack of knowledge of American history. Some or several particulars I pointed out, therefore, could be meaningless. On the other hand, I may have missed finding others, which may be important.

Even my knowledge of American Freemasonry and of its Rituals is inadequate for a full understanding of the message, which I believe the film was to pass on. My work takes on, therefore, just its own worth: that of a simple brick, to help to build our Temple.

1 - The Beginning

On a stormy night the rain, the thunder and lightning, with their “noise and rumble”, remind us of “the picture of human life”, which is a detail of our Masonic Initiation. Little Ben enters his grandfather’s attic, which is “a high, dark place”, where there are things “hidden, or forgotten”, but

in any case, related to his own “family”.

He climbs a ladder. It is a straight stairway of three steps (the images look very clear). It may be just a coincidence, but this particular could also mean the start of a way. (We say that an Apprentice climbs a straight stair of three steps; a Fellow, a curved stair of five steps, at the end of which there is the Mid-Chamber).

His grandfather “surprises” him, but at the boy’s sincere request (he says: “I want to know!”), his grandfather tells him the “legend” about a secret. (I might point out that the grandfather is played by Christopher Plummer, who played Br. Kipling in the masonic film “The Man Who Would Be King”, and who is said to be a Brother himself.)

Charles Carroll, a member of a secret society called “The Masons”, was nearly on point of death, and was urged to transmit the piece of a secret he knew. Being unable to see President Jackson (who, by the way, was a Freemason), he passed on this “piece of the secret”, this “clue”, to his stable-boy and coachman. This person was in charge of Jackson’s horses, enjoyed the President’s confidence and perhaps might be symbolically interpreted as a “squire”.

The secret was related to a treasure, «...beyond all imagining, which in the course of man’s history (men also “fought and “stole” for it, perhaps in a Prometeic sense) grew bigger and bigger and then suddenly it vanished.» A detail should be noted: during the grandfather’s tale the scene fades from his face to the image of the Pyramides and for a while the grandfather’s eye becomes “the Eye” above the Unfinished Pyramid.

«... it didn’t reappear for more than a thousand years, when knights from the First Crusade discovered secret vaults beneath the Temple of Solomon. The treasure was too great for any one man, not even a king... so they brought it back to Europe, and took the name “The Knights Templar”. During the following century (1200 - 1300) they took it out of Europe and they formed a new brotherhood called “The Freemasons”, in honour of the builders of the great Temple. By the time of the American Revolution, the treasure had been hidden again» (that is traditionally “veiled”).

It is clearly said that Freemasonry was preserving the secret of the treasure’s location (n.b. Freemasonry is correctly defined not as a “sect”, but as a “secret society”: that is, taking care of a secret); and that many among the Founding Fathers of the United States were Freemasons. Some are reported: naturally George Washington and Benjamin Franklin, the most well-known; and Paul Revere, who is a national hero in the U.S.A. He made the long ride to Lexington, to warn the patriots of the arrival of British troops: a sort of a “Tiler” or a “Warden”? (I will have more to say about him further on.).

«They knew they had to make sure the treasure would never fall into the hands of the British so they devised a series of clues and maps to its location. Over the time the clues were lost or forgotten until only one remained: the one owned by Charles Carroll.» A leaflet appears with the note “The secret lies with Charlotte”. But the secret was lost then. Not even Carroll knew how to interpret the message (like a “lost word”?).

«Among the Founding Fathers there were Freemasons, who left us signs like this (he shows a one dollar banknote with the Unfinished Pyramid and the All-seeing Eye), symbols of the Knights Templar, guardians of the Treasure: they’re speaking to us through these.»

At this point, the boy’s Father arrives. He seems sceptical and disillusioned, and regards the search for treasure as a waste of time. The grandfather (his father) states openly that the Search for Treasure was not, nor ever had been, about the money. Considering that in any case he will not deny his help to Ben during the events, and that finally, conscious that the Search is right and just, he will “start working” again. Ben’s Father reminds me of a “sleepy Brother” who then “awakens”.

The boy asks his Grandfather: «Are we Knights?» «Do you want to be a Knight?» «Yes.»

Then Grandfather makes him kneel down, and confers a symbolic investiture on him as a Knight Templar, laying his jacket on his shoulders as a mantle (the mantle, one of the Templars’ symbols, means “covering, concealment, protection”: in this case, of the secret to be handed down).

«Benjamin Franklin Gates, you take upon yourself the duty of the Templars, the Freemasons, and the family Gates» (they were descendants of Charles Carroll’s stable-boy). The boy swears. It is his “virtual” initiation.

Grandfather pronounces the full name of the boy, just to underline it, after having told him (that is, handed down to him) the story of the treasure, in which Benjamin Franklin (B. F.) as we shall see, plays a main role. The name "B. F." (Ben) is significant as a symbolic or "initiate" name. Moreover, "Gates" means door, passage. This could be related both to the "mission" of finding "doors" and going beyond and also to the office of a "door warder, protector" (...Tiler).

2 - The "Charlotte" - The "pipe"

How Ben guesses that he had to look for "Charlotte" as a ship, is not told.

Perhaps we may report to B. F.'s endeavouring, when he was in France, to send military supplies (weapons and ammunition: see the gunpowder) to American "rebels": of course, by ship.

Another supposition: English Admiral Richard Howe (brother of General William Howe, and both fighting against American rebels in the War of Independence), was in charge of a battleship named "Queen Charlotte". Maybe it is not a coincidence that Ben's "bad-partner", Ian, has been given the same name of the old English enemy. And it is not clear, nor easy to understand, whether the "Charlotte" in our film was "bringing the pipe to America", or was for some reason "taking it away".

Besides, three American seaports are named "Charlotte". Many references to places, dates and events of American History in this film are not known to me; but are obviously supposed to be well known to Ben, who, later on, is said to have a degree in American History. This means he had a profound knowledge of traditions, allegorically like "esoteric knowledge". Finally, it could not be just another 'coincidence' that in the grandfather's attic a model of a sailing ship can be seen in a shot which is merely a flash.

In any case, Ben, according to the tale of the film, *knows* he must look for a ship to start his search. The ship may also symbolize a 'means', or a "technique", to cross, to go beyond water: "water", a changeable and lunar world, the sphere of the psyche and the inner soul.

Ben then leaves to look for "Charlotte-ship" together with a young friend (I wonder why he is said to be coming from "a little windowless cubicle"): a computer and technology expert; and with a temporary search-mate, or "ally", and some minor entourage.

The ship is blocked in the frozen water: as if knowledge, or knowledge passing on, had been "frozen" by time or by some obscure circumstances, and was awaiting to be discovered, "awakened", like a "Sleeping Beauty" by her Prince. The water had frozen and everything remained still and forgotten, as if by lack of "warmth, fervour", which is the will of knowledge, the desire for quest.

But at the same time the potential is intact, the "fire" is still there, ready to flare up and destroy, if aroused or lighted in an uncontrolled way.

Since the treasure is not there, Ben guesses that he has to search for more clues and hidden indications, that only those who own the right traditional knowledge may understand. Using care and intuition, he finds something in a gunpowder barrel; indeed, the whole ship is full of gunpowder. This could remind us of what had been said about B. F. and the battleship, but it might also be an *obscure* hint to the "secret of the Templars" as something "explosive".

The object he finds is a strange, Templar-castle-shaped pipe. Ben uses his intelligence to go on with his search and his intuitions, for a good while, come from reasoning and deductions (1st degree?). He doesn't know until his final insight (3rd degree?) how to "use" the pipe, which until that very moment may perhaps remind us of the stone rejected by the builders that at last reveals itself to be the keystone of the Temple.

The pipe's strange shape might contain another symbol: that of a "sacred pipe" borrowed from the Native American tradition, symbolizing peace, the harmony between man and nature, and also a means to attain knowledge by adequate techniques. It is noteworthy that the pipe lies inside a case, on which are reproduced the figures of some "white" men, who are dressed and equipped like "American settlers", and some "Redskins". Between the two groups there is an eagle, a symbol related both to the Native Americans and to the "new" independent Americans.

On the pipe stem there are some engravings (scrollwork). Ben guesses they form a “turned” or “negative” message. It should be noted that these engravings, which once “developed” are easy to see and read, could instead seem to be only queer senseless signs at a superficial glance.

To read the message, without trying to find any other way, Ben uses his own blood, which might be a reference to the initiatic tradition “flowing” in his veins, with all the meanings symbolically related to blood.

A series of very clear signs appears: a Templar cross, a triangle, a Square and Compasses, an open Book, another triangle inscribed in a circle (a symbol of York Rite, in which Templar tradition is still living) and the words: “The legend writ - the stain effected - the key in Silence undetected - fifty five in iron pen - Mr. Matlack can’t offend”.

Once the sentence has been decoded, Ben also declares that among the signers of the Declaration of Independence there were several Freemasons: «... nine at least». Could this be another reference to the Templars? Nine is the minimum needed to open a K.T.’s Commandery.

The “why” of this odd discovery, could be explained by this historic fact: according to some authors and historians, both the York Rite and the A. A. Scottish Rite were founded in America, and it emerges that as far back as 1769, at the time the American Revolution was about to begin, the masonic degree of Knight Templar did not exist. This degree was conferred on someone for the first time in 1769 in Boston at the R. L. St. Andrew, to which, among others, John Hancock and Paul Revere belonged. Subsequently, that degree was “exported” to Great Britain. The Templar symbol of the “ship amid the ice” might suggest that “the Treasure of the Templars”, which is to be searched for and “found” by each Knight, consists merely in deciphering and understanding the symbols of the degree itself.

At this point, the “separation” between Ben and Ian takes place. Ben shows himself to be devoted to his search as *a search for knowledge* and willing to use even hazardous “techniques” to prevent the treasure, and what it may lead to, from falling into the hands of the “bad ones”. His former “ally”, that is to say his “metallic” counterpart, is, however, interested only in the “monetary” value of the treasure. He actually wants to steal the Declaration, that is he wants to seize “the keys” illegally, unjustly (n.b. the philological meaning is quite the same), in order to obtain personal material riches.

It has already been noted that “bad” Ian has the name Howe: the same of no fewer than three English Generals and Admirals who fought against the Americans during the War of Independence. In addition, Ian Howe really seems to be playing the part of “the English”.

immediately apparent.

After their first skirmish, Ben and Abigail will act together and cooperate, until their final “union”. At their first meeting, Ben, answering her, declares that they were searching for “hidden items of historic and intrinsic value”; and to the question, “Are you treasure-hunters?”, he answers (more or less) “We’re more like treasure-protectors”. These words do not seem to be just cautious, but quite accurate.

Later on, Ben reads aloud a passage of the Declaration: “... when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object, evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security.”

He then remarks that “people don’t talk that way any more...”, and explains that this means that “if there’s something wrong, those who have the ability to take action have the responsibility to take action”.



4 - The Action

Then, the theft of the Declaration of Independence is prepared and carried out (both by Ben and Ian). The accuracy by which buildings and monuments, well known to be of masonic inspiration, are shown, is quite remarkable. Also noteworthy is the fact that no one is killed or wounded by Ben and his mates, nor by the “bad ones” (even if they make use of force): there is no emphasis on violence in any part of this film.

When F.B.I. Agent Peter Sadosky (?) finds out Ben’s identity it is explained that the “Silence Dogood’s letters”, which were a main clue in further motivating the search, were some pieces B. Franklin wrote at the age of 16 for the New England Courant, signed “Silence Dogood”, pseudonym of a middle-aged widow. The reference to a “widow” seems indicative rather than queer; and “Silence-Dogood” may also mean “perform good deeds in silence”, which should be a masonic way of acting.

It is also said that Ben has a degree in American History and in Mechanical Engineering, and experience also gained from Navy ROTC (??) and the Naval Diving and Salvage Training Center.

Ben’s father’s name is Patrick, meaning “patrician”. Might he perhaps be of “noble” or “knightly” descent? Patrick appears to be sceptical and disillusioned as someone may be who has searched for a long time with no results. He states: “... the legend says that the Treasure was buried to keep it from the British, but what really happened was the legend was invented to keep the British occupied in searching for buried treasure... the treasure is a myth.” These words are reminiscent of the alchemists, who, in order to distract the Church from their real studies, concealed their aims under the veil of a “quest for gold”.

Ben, Abigail and Riley go on with their search with the help of a little money that Ben's father kept in the booklet "Common Sense". Perhaps it is not only an exhortation to "act wisely": "Common Sense" was a pamphlet written in 1776 (shortly before the drafting of the Declaration) by Thomas Paine, a writer and a supporter of independence, a friend of B.F.'s and a Freemason himself. Jefferson took a good part of the concepts of "independence", which are found in his Declaration, from the ideas he expressed in this booklet.

Still helped by his knowledge of history and its characters (by analogy: of Tradition and its symbols), Ben finds a sign, printed (indeed!) on the \$100 banknote, which in theory, and in this case as well, should be an "object" within everyone's reach. Its hidden message, however, can be interpreted only by those who "know": the clock on the belfry, through which he gets another clue, is again an openly masonic one (the brick with the Square and Compasses).

They find a particular pair of spectacles, which are said to have been invented by B. F.: an "instrument for sight" ("the vision to see the treasured past", Ben says), by means of which they make out, at last, the drawing on the back of the Declaration: the indication of a spot, located at a crossroad.

Pursued by the "bad ones", they separate, and Ben is arrested by the G-Men. Agent Sadusky questions Ben, who tells him the whole story. Sadusky believes Ben with no difficulty, as if he knew something about it already, and for a moment his hand is seen and on it a ring with a Square and Compasses seal. In the course of the inquiry, he seems to be toying with the spectacles. Voluntarily or not, he lets Ben understand how to use them, and guess that there are other ways of "seeing".

Sadusky agrees to trust Ben to try to recover the Declaration. Ben has to get in touch with Ian and must find a "third door" to get out of the situation (leading him to prison, whether he cooperates or not with the Agent).

The meeting "terrain" is on board an aircraft carrier, an intermediate place, or a way among earth, water, air and fire. Several technical (that is, mental) tricks are attempted to catch Ian. Ben realizes, however, that he has to instead "pass under - into waters" (which was part of his "knowledge"), that is he has to experience an emotional implication (and he'll be compelled to join Ian, owing to the menace to his father and Abigail); yet trying to keep his self-control and consciousness.

Once the Declaration, and also the "templar" pipe, have been taken back from Ian, Ben is forced to reveal the next steps to attain the treasure. From the drawing on the back, which could be seen with the help of the special glasses, he had guessed that the indicated spot was the crossroad between present Broadway and Wall Street, where a "temple" lies (Trinity Church). Knowing how to use the glasses, he also guesses that they have to go on searching "beneath" the church itself.

5 - The Treasure

The next clue brings us again to Freemasonry and it is a clear invitation to "explore depths". They enter a dungeon which is too "exaggerated" not to be symbolic - a gigantic well, seemingly bottomless, in which they must let themselves down.

One of the minor characters asks a "rational" question: "How could they build all this with hand tools?" Ben answers: "Same way they built the Pyramids, and the Great Wall of China" (and Riley adds "...the aliens helped them..."); that is to say: with the use of an art which permits the building of extraordinary things (another reference to the "Royal Art").

Another "exaggerated" detail, at a "rational" glance, is that all torches in the dungeon catch fire at once, as if they weren't almost 200 years old as one may presume. This could mean that the searcher, approaching the truth, enlightens his own deep darkness by his illuminating insight.

At last they reach a sort of Occultum Lapidem (Hidden Stone), a mysterious place which, to all appearances, has no way out, and in front of which the "bad one", who is neither able to "see" nor to "imagine", is deceived by Ben and his father, who is now "back from sleep". "The bad one" goes away following a false indication, leaving them in a seemingly desperate situation.

Ben, however, is now in possession of the right “keys” to fathom even deeper, and goes up to what seems to be a door in a wall, where a “masonic eye” is painted. He guesses how to open the door, and they enter a room, which might have contained the treasure as there is still some trace of it. At first they think it might have been stolen or moved from there.

Ben looks discouraged, but at this point his father, who has “woken up”, helps him saying: “...this room is real, and that means the treasure is real. We’re in the company of some of the most brilliant minds in history because you found what they left behind for us to find and understood the meaning of it. You did it, Ben, for all of us... let’s keep looking for it”.

With a final intuition, Ben guesses how to use their first clue: the Templar-castle shaped pipe, which turns out to be quite a “key” to open the last door, truly leading to the treasure.

An enormous cave or hall appears to them (this also is too exaggerated to be simply “rational”), where a very large quantity of “treasures” lie.

At last “lighting” which is immediate and fully wide, as if to symbolize an “enlightenment”, allows them to see. There is nothing which can be considered a “treasure” in the sense of normal riches: neither jewels, nor golden coins or the like. The treasure consists of antiques and objects from ancient traditions - Egyptian tradition in particular. A sarcophagus and Egyptian statues can be seen and Abigail notes some scrolls from the lost Alexandria Library.

As a further “queer” detail, young Riley observes with emotion, as if he recognizes him, and quite as if he were looking for him, a very special “man”, which he describes: “He is a big bluish-greenish man, with a strange-looking goatee - I’m guessing that’s significant.” It is a correct description of Osiris, but it also seems to be a reference to the “Green Man” of Templar’s Rosslyn Chapel...

Victorious at last, they find their way out from underground. They “went in” through a grave and through a grave they come out: a perfect analogy of a “trip to the Hades” (the Interior).

6 - The End

They meet Agent Sadusky, and Ben “deals” with him. Sadusky then reveals himself as a member of the “Society” and openly shows his masonic ring. It seems he knew everything, and looks pleased that the Treasure has been found by Ben.

Ben, naturally, doesn’t think of “getting rich” with the treasure.

He frankly declares that “the treasure belongs to the whole of mankind” and that he clearly wants it to be “transferred, given” to mankind.

There is still a point in abeyance: “Someone’s got to go to prison”, says Sadusky. Who’ll have to? It’s not only a “happy ending” that it happens to be Ian: it is indeed an exact indication that “vice must be put in dark and deep dungeons” (as our Masonic rituals say).

Ben and his “friends” (or rather, his counterparts), having found the Treasure, do, however, achieve some wealth, but they joke about it and don’t seem to give much importance to it.

There is also a last reference to Egypt (Cairo Museum), as if to confirm that Initiatic Tradition comes from there, returns there, and there he, Ben, is now “accepted”: his initiation has turned from virtual to real.

The real treasure Ben found, says Riley, is “her”, the woman, his own counterpart.

7 - Some Comments

This film may be considered a downright masonic “manifesto”. It is suitable for everybody, including children and it sends positive, easy to understand messages to everybody from an “up to date” point of. Those who know a little more than average may understand some “utterances” and some concepts. The message to those who should be able to “read” or understand it, that is to the Masons, appears to be simple, while on the contrary it is full of particular references.

Why is so much importance (beyond the narrative starting point) given to an “invisible” (“undetected”) message drawn on the back of the famous Declaration? This detail, on which the

whole story hinges, seems to have been enhanced if we understand the historical and analogical significance of the American Declaration of Independence.

Leaving out any political opinion in the strict sense, and considering that institutions, societies and states are made by men and are therefore highly perfectible, we must not forget that the U.S.A. has been, and still is, the most complete realization in the world of a state, founded on principles, which for the most part, have been drawn from Universal Freemasonry. With the consciousness of how much may be imperfect, and how much is to be improved, in a nation founded on freedom and men's rights, the most enlightened minds, "...the most brilliant of the whole history", work "respiteless" to pass on to the world that light, which they faithfully believe to be an expression of a superior law.

All this may explain the history of the U.S.A., and a large part of their foreign policy (certainly accompanied by many errors, and also grave ones), as expressions of a "mission" to be performed towards the mankind (and this feeling is exactly mentioned, in our film, in the Declaration quotation). It also explains their commitment on communicating and spreading ideas and principles in various ways, among which cinema is the most present and accessible to everybody.

Furthermore, I think it may also explain the meaning of the original title itself: "National Treasure". It is said a couple of times in the Film that "...the Treasure was too great for a single man, even for a King". I believe that this is not referred to the personal figure of any king, be it historical or mythological (and as a matter of fact there are no such references); but that the symbolic figure of the "king" is instead identified with the "nation": that is, not only a "state" in administrative and political sense, but all the traditional, ethic, ethnic and civil whole, forming just the identity of a "nation", which is a concept strongly felt by the Americans.

Ben interprets this feeling, by working and struggling to the Treasure's "protection", and by his will to "hand it down" to mankind.

Furthermore, a value always held as a "treasure" by the Americans (and not by them only), which is particularly extolled in the Declaration, and quite opposed to the "king", is Freedom, on which the whole American-Masonic world is founded.

The crypted message itself, hidden on the "back" (as if symbolically "veiled") and legible only by those who put themselves in a "right" condition, has the value of a legacy, of an historic testimony, of a handed down initiatic knowledge.

I wrote some years ago that "... Freemasonry ... is the tradition of a method, of an executive way of searching for truth and light, by means of some instruments available to mankind since its very beginning: symbols. Symbols that took various forms: myths, allegories, legends, then graphic and architectural forms, while still maintaining their function as means of interpreting reality."