

Master's Piece

By Unknown

In the olden time it was no easy matter for a man to become a Freemason. He had to win the right by hard work, technical skill, and personal worth. Then, as now, he had to prove himself a freeman, of lawful age, legitimate birth, of sound body and good repute to even be eligible at all. Also, he had to bind himself to serve under rigid rules for seven years, his service being at once a test of his character and a training for his work. If he proved incompetent or unworthy, he was sent away.

In all operative lodges of the Middle Ages, as in the guilds of skilled artisans of the same period, young men entered as Apprentices, vowing absolute obedience, for the lodge was a school of the seven sciences, as well as of the art of building. At first the Apprentice was little more than a servant, doing the most menial work, and if he proved himself trustworthy and proficient his wages were increased; but, the rules were never relaxed, "except at Christmastime," as the Old Charges tell us, when there was a period of freedom duly celebrated with feast and frolic.

The rules by which an Apprentice pledged himself to live, as we find them recorded in the Old Charges, were very strict. He had first to confess his faith in God, vowing to honor the Church, the State, and the Master under whom he served; agreeing not to absent himself from the service of the Order save with the license of the Master. He must be honest and upright, faithful in keeping the secrets of the Craft and the Confidence of his fellows. He must not only be chaste, but must not marry or contract himself to any women during the term of his Apprenticeship. He must be obedient to the Master without argument or murmuring, respectful to all Freemasons, avoiding uncivil speech, free from slander and dispute. He must not frequent any tavern or alehouse, except it be upon an errand of the Master, or with his consent.

Such was the severe rule under which an Apprentice learned the art and secrets of the Craft. After seven years of study and discipline, either in the lodge or at the Annual Assembly (where awards were usually made), he presented his "Masterpiece," some bit of stone or metal carefully carved, for the inspection of the Master, saying, "Behold my experience!" By which he meant the sum of his experiments. He had spoiled many a bit of stone. He had spent laborious nights and days, and the whole was in that tiny bit of work. His Masterpiece was carefully examined

by the Masters assembled and if it was approved he was made a Master Mason, entitled to take his kit of tools and go out as a workman, a Master and Fellow of his Craft. Not, however, until he had selected a Mark by which his work could be identified, and renewed his vows to the Order in which he was now a Fellow.

The old order was first Apprentice, then Master, then Fellow - Mastership being, in the early time, not a degree conferred, but a reward of skill as a workman and of merit as a man. The reversal of the order today is due, no doubt, to the custom of the German Guilds, where a Fellow Craft was required to serve two additional years as a journeyman before becoming a Master. No such custom was known in England. Indeed, the reverse was true, and it was the Apprentice who prepared his Masterpiece, and if it was accepted, he became a Master. Having won his mastership, he was entitled to become a Fellow - that is, a peer and Fellow of the Craft which hitherto he had only served. Hence, all through the Old Charges, the order is "Masters and Fellows," but there are signs to show that a distinction was made according to ability and skill.

For example, in the Matthew Cooke MS, we read that it had been "ordained that they who were passing of cunning should be passing honored," and those less skilled were commanded to call the more skilled "Masters." Then it is added, "They that were less of wit should not be called servant nor subject, but Fellow, for nobility of their gentle blood." After this manner our ancient brethren faced the fact of human inequality of ability and initiative. Those who were of greater skill held a higher position and were called Masters, while the masses of the Craft were called Fellows. A further distinction must be made between "Master" and a "Master of the Work," now represented by the Master of the lodge. Between a Master and the Master of the Work there was no difference, of course, except an accidental one; they were both Masters and Fellows. Any Master could become a Master of the Work provided he was of sufficient skill and had the fortune to be chosen as such either by the employer or the lodge, or both.

What a rite or ritual, if any, accompanied the making of a Master in the old operative lodges is still a matter of discussion. In an age devoted to ceremonial it is hard to imagine such an important event without its appropriate ceremony, but the details are obscure. But this is plain enough; all the materials out of which the degrees were later developed existed, if not in drama, at least in legend. Elaborate drama would not be necessary in an operative lodge. Even today, much of what is acted out in an American Lodge, is merely recited in an English Lodge. Students seem pretty well agreed that from a very early time there were two ceremonies, or degrees, although, no doubt, in a much less elaborate form than now practiced. As the Order, after the close of the Cathedral-Building period passed into its speculative character, there would naturally be many changes and much that was routine in an operative lodge became ritual in a speculative lodge.

This is not the time to discuss the origin and development of the Third Degree, except to say that those who imagine that it was an invention fabricated by Anderson and others at the time of

the revival of Masonry, in 1717, are clearly wrong. Such a degree could have never been imposed upon the Craft, unless it harmonized with some previous ceremony, or, at least, with ideas, traditions and legends familiar and common to the members of the Craft. That such ideas and traditions did exist in the Craft we have ample evidence. Long before 1717 we hear hints increase as the office of Master of the Work lost its practical aspect after the Cathedral-Building period. What was the Master's part? Unfortunately we cannot discuss it in print; but nothing is plainer than, that we do not have to go outside of Masonry itself to find the materials out of which all three degrees, as they now exist, were developed.

Masonry was not invented; it grew. Today it unfolds its wise and good and beautiful truth in three noble and impressive degrees, and no man can take them to heart and not be ennobled and enriched by their dignity and beauty. The First lays emphasis upon that fundamental righteousness without which a man is not a man, but a medley of warring passions - that purification of heart which is the basis alike of life and religion. The Second lays stress upon the culture of the mind, the training of its faculties in the quest of knowledge, without which man remains a child. The Third seeks to initiate us, symbolically, into the eternal life, making us victors over death before it arrives. The First is the Degree of Youth, the Second the Degree of Manhood, the Third the consolation and conquest of Old Age, when evening shadows fall and the Eternal World and its unknown adventure draw near.

What then, for each of us today, is meant by the Master's Piece? Is it simply a quaint custom handed down from our ancient brethren, in which we learn how an Apprentice was made a Master of his Craft? It is that indeed, but much more. Unless we have eyes to see double meaning everywhere in Masonry, a moral application and a spiritual suggestion, we see little or nothing. But if we have eyes to see it is always a parable, an allegory, a symbol, and the Master's Piece of olden time becomes an emblem of that upon which every man is working all the time and everywhere, whether he is aware of it or not - his character, his personality, by which he will be tested and tried at last. Character, as the word means, is something carved, something wrought out of the raw stuff and hard material of life. All we do, all we think, goes into the making of it. Every passion, every aspiration has to do with it. If we are selfish, it is ugly. If we are hateful, it is hideous. Williams James went so far as to say that just as the stubs remain in the check-book to register the transaction when the check is removed, so every mental act, every deed becomes a part of our being and character. Such a fact makes a man ponder and consider what he is making out of his life, and what it will look like at the end. Like the Masons of old, apprenticed in the school of life, we work for "a penny a day." We never receive a large sum all at once, but the little reward of daily duties. The scholar, the man of science attains truth, not in a day, but slowly, little by little, fact by fact. In the same way, day by day, act by act, we make our character by which we shall stand judged before the Master of all Good Work. Often enough men make such a bad botch of it that they have to begin all over again. The greatest truth taught in religion is the forgiveness of God, which erases the past and gives us

another chance. All of us have spoiled enough material, dulled enough tools and made enough mistakes to teach us that life without charity is cruel and bitter.

Goethe, a great Mason, said that talent may develop in solitude, but character is created in society. It is the fruit of fellowship. Genius may shine aloof and alone, like a star, but goodness is social, and it takes two men and God to make a brother. In the Holy Book which lies open on our Altar we read: "No man liveth unto himself; no man dieth unto himself." We are tied together, seeking that truth which none may learn for another, and none may learn alone. If evil men can drag us down, good men can lift us up. No one of us is strong enough not to need the companionship of good men and the consecration of great ideals. Here lies, perhaps, the deepest meaning and value of Masonry; it is fellowship of men seeking goodness, and to yield ourselves to its influence, to be drawn into its spirit and quest, is to be made better than ourselves. Amid such influence each of us is making his Master's Piece. God is all the time refining, polishing, strokes now tender, now terrible. That is the meaning of pain, sorrow and death. It is the chisel of the Master cutting the rough stone. How hard the mallet strikes, but the stone becomes a pillar, an arch, perhaps an altar emblem. "Him that overcometh, I will make a pillar in the Temple of my God." The masterpiece of life, at once the best service to man and the fairest offering to God, is a pure, faithful, heroic, beautiful Character.

"Oh! the Cedars of Lebanon grow at our door,
And the quarry is sunk at our gate;
And the ships out of Ophir, with Golden ore,
For our summoning mandate wait;
And the word of a Master Mason
May the house of our soul create!
While the day hath light let the light be used,
For no man shall the night control!
Or ever the silver cord be loosed,
Or broken the golden bowl,
May we build King Solomon's Temple
In the true Masonic Soul!"

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