The Holy Royal Arch - History and Meaning

Amended from a paper By REV. JOHN GEORGE GIBSON, D.D., LLD. (1906)

As I have indicated in my papers upon the Fellow Craft and Master Mason degrees, there was about the first decade of the 18th century (1710) a considerable modification of ritual and arrangement with regard to what had been but one, or at the most, two degrees, which constituted the membership of the revived Craft lodge and workings.

The Entered Apprentice became distinct, as a novice, a learner, a disciple; the Master Mason was equally distinct from the first grade, and almost as much distinguished from the intermediate, quasi-operative grade of Fellow Craft.

And this involved not only a division of the ritual, but a rounding of the office, an introduction and a finale, and a special pointing of the significance of each degree.

When Dr. Anderson's Constitutions were amended in 1723 the period of transition has been reached.

The conflict and comparison of workings were gradually resolved, from the totality of differences, to a symbolic oneness; and, although the separate existence, and essential character, of the Arch Degree had not any evidential and official basis, there is little doubt that the degree was being worked.

Sometimes as an additional degree, other times as a superior degree, and in yet other cases as a completion of the Master Mason Degree.

At first it would appear to have been worked both in the Craft Lodge, and in special Arch Lodges, and there are many indications, that the Scots Lodges in France did a great deal to fix the character of the degree and to make it popular.

We find, according to Dr. Crawley, that in a Masonic procession at Youghal (Ireland) in 1743 two Excellent Masons carried "The Royal Arch."

One particularly significant feature of the revival of Masonry in England in1813 is the exalted rank given, on all occasions, to the Royal Arch Degree. This emphasis is clear in that in 1813, according to the Articles of Union,

"It is declared and pronounced that pure Ancient Masonry consists of three degrees, and no more; viz: those of the E.A., the F. C., and the M. M. (including the Supreme Order of the Holy Royal Arch)."

Previously to this the R. A. degree was worked under both Grand Lodges; but now its definite place is recognized officially, and the Grand Chapters of both Grand Lodges became one in 1817.

When we say that the R. A. was regarded as the completion of the Master Mason degree, we must not conclude that all Master Masons could legitimately reach that distinction, since only Masters who had passed the chair were eligible for candidature.

It was a kind of Past Master's Lodge of Excellence, and in order that worthy brothers of long established Masonic status might qualify, the irregular degree or ceremony of "Installed Master" or "Virtual Past Master"; was worked until it became a scandal through its abuse, and a resolution was passed in Grand Chapter in 1783 that only "Masters and Past Masters ought to be admitted Masters of the Royal Arch."

Everywhere, practically, the legend is the same, and is but the means of conveying truth.
The search for the Lost Word, for the Logos, leads to the discovery of the meaning, and the immortality of life.

In my preliminary excursus in regard to the Pagan Mysteries, I referred to the single experience that was explained in the Mysteries of the Giblites, and in those of the Eleusis.

The Royal Arch ideal is the revelation of the absolute life of our Creator.

We have this figure in varied forms in all human history. In Adam's expulsion from Paradise and the birth of Cain, in Cain's desolation and the discovery of Arts and Science, in Noah's fidelity and the floating of the Ark, in the Solemnities of Adonis or Tamnuz, - there is the same assertion of the safety of that which is hidden, of that which, for the sake of righteousness, is hidden in the ground.

When the Hebrew Moses stood by the Burning Bush, by the Sacred fire upon holy ground, mourning the failures of Israel, and the woes of his brethren, and yet in fortitude obeying a Creator's call to service, the word was made plain to him, the Logos of Eternal Life and power.

You have often read the searching prayer, the wistful yearning of one seeking after the Great I AM. You have read of the captives wailing by the Eastern Rivers because their masters asked of them to sing one of Zion's songs in the land of bondage or exile; and you can understand the joy of the Jews who re-asserted the absolute sufficiency of Infinite God as they dedicated the Temple of the Restoration.

The system of the Royal Arch is this scene of joy. This joy of Easter, this assertion of immortality, this clear demonstration of the Crown that follows the Sacrifice

Freemasonry is a system of morality; and Master Masons know how the system results in the loyal research and service of those who face the tragedy of the darkness which introduces them to the Master's Light.

This, as I indicated in my article in the Freemason of December 23, 1906, could not continue.

Hope springs, eternal, in the human breast; and when the grave is closed the true Mason sets his gaze upon the Veil which separates life from death.

To the Loyal Master Mason, Capitular degree is open; and in the Royal Arch he finds the glory of a consummated Sacrifice and of a splendid persistent resurrection.

The Sun is not lost: he comes again. Light is not lost: it increases in its extended application each day. To the true Mason who has learned to serve, the reward of sight is granted. "He that shall endure to the end, the same shall be saved." "Weeping may endure for the night; but joy cometh in the morning." And the joy none can take away, because it is inspired by the absolute persistence of an Eternal Creator and Architect of Life.

The four degrees are in continued sequence: they are the stages of Masonic development and growth.

This is shown in the color and insignia of the Order.

In the Apron there is the white Lambskin; there is also, as a constituent of the purple of the border, the Craft blue (retained in the Third Principal's Robe and in the Grand Officers' collars), and there is also (partly overlapping the Craft blue and producing purple, and partly upon the clear white) the Royal Red of the King.

We have then in the Apron the Supreme Red, which is the Royal Arch color, the Craft Blue, in the purple, and the White of innocence and sacrifice in the lambskin apron.

Craft ideals are not cast out with the passing of the veils, they are only absorbed in a greater and more perfect experience.

But the series of colors is still more gradual when we regard the robes of the principals. There we have the Craft Blue in the High Priest's robe (Joshua) the Purple in the Prophet's robe,(Haggai) and the Red in the King' Robe (Zerubbabel)

There is also a significant gradation of creed and emphasis. In a Craft lodge the triangle of Life is un-drawn, although it is suggested by the gradual arrangement of the rosettes upon the apron.

When the Master Mason is raised, he takes a rosette (or sign of life) upon the center of the apron flap, so completing the three points from which the sides of a triangle may be drawn.

In the Crimson and Purple indented border of the Royal Arch Apron, the Crimson, or King's color, points to the center of this flap, to what was the apex of a triangle - imagined but un-drawn. But now there is no imagined triangle but a completed one containing a yet more significant symbol in the triple tau.

The suggestion is unmistakable. Bro. A. H. Morgan has, in one of his lectures, very properly indicated that the Christian Church did not for the first time discover the meaning of the Cross when they used it for a religious emblem.

It is the most ancient of symbols. In early ages it was the sign of the life of the Nile Valley, and has always been the indicator of Life. Take the element of Life from the Christian's Cross and nothing is left but the statement of a historical fact.

The number three is sacred in all human mysteries - to pagan and to Christian. The triple tau involves the idea of the life that is sacred to the Creator, and the triangle means the Creative Energy of the G.A.O.T.U. This is the victory by which we overcome the hardships of a strenuous life - faith in the Right and Power of the All-Wise.

The Royal Arch apron symbolizes this. And the sash has the same significance with its red diamond always outside and the Craft, or blue, diamond inside.

There is one part of the emblem upon the apron which requires especial notice, and that is the triangle. A Past Master in a Craft lodge may substitute the horizontals and perpendiculars for the ordinary rosettes of a Master Mason. But he may not wear the triple tau or the described triangle until he has passed the veils.

Why? It is not an arbitrary regulation, nor merely a badge of rank. The significance of the triple tau plus that of the triangle is geometric. The Past Master of a Craft lodge studies the discovery of Euclid's 47th proposition, and finds a world of possibility in the fact that the square upon the hypotenuse is equal to the sum of the squares upon the other two sides of a right-angled triangle.

And he wears an emblem which describes twice 90°, or a fourth part of a circle.

When he is exalted to the Arch degree, he remembers that the sum of the angles of any triangle equal two right angles. He sees also that in the R. A. Emblem, is the triad of two right angles; and as he is metaphorically restored from death to a life of immeasurable potentialities he ponders upon the significance of this combination.

He should realize also that as there is no death to life, so there is no limit to the growth and progression of humanity within the circle of the Universe which has been drawn around his life by the unerring hand of the Grand Geometrician. The Royal Arch degree is one of startling suggestions and of amazing revelations. The idea is old as Mankind is, though the present form of the Mystery cannot record an age of quite two centuries. It is also the completion of Symbolic Masonry.