The Royal Arch as the Perfection of the Master's Degree

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We are all familiar with the words addressed to the newly exalted companion:

"You may perhaps imagine you have this day taken a fourth degree in Freemasonry, such, however, is not the case, it is the Master Mason's completed."

But how do we reconcile that statement with this extract from the 1807 Laws and Regulations of the Antients Grand Lodge?

"ANCIENT MASONRY consists of four Degrees - the three first of which are, that of Apprentice, the Fellow Craft, and the sublime degree of Master; and a brother being well versed in these degrees, and otherwise qualified, as hereafter will be expressed, is eligible to be admitted to the fourth degree, the Holy Royal Arch. This degree is certainly more august, sublime, and important than those which precede it, and is the summit and perfection of Ancient Masonry."

The answer is compromise, for at a special convocation of the Grand Chapter of the Moderns on November 30, 1813 the following report was given:

". . . The Grand Lodge of England under H.R.H. The Duke of Sussex had entered into preliminary Articles with the Grand Lodge now under H.R.H. The Duke of Kent for an Union of the two Grand Lodges under one Grand Master. That by those Articles the Royal Arch was acknowledged as the perfection of the Masters Degree . . . ."

The Oxford English Dictionary equates perfection with completion, the words are synonymous, and, as the Articles of Union declared:

". . . that pure Antient Masonry consists of three degrees and no more, viz., those of Entered Apprentice, the Fellow Craft, and the Master Mason, including the Supreme Order of the Holy Royal Arch."

The expression *"Master Mason's completed,"* to the newly exalted companion can be well justified even though the administration and exercise of the Royal Arch is under a separate organization.

The Union of the two Grand Lodges was effected in December 1813 but it was nearly four years before the situation of the Royal Arch was cleared. In 1817, after the Union of the Grand Chapters, the new Laws and Regulations included the following statement:

"That to this Order none ought to be admitted but men who have passed through the probationary degrees of Masonry, have presided as Masters, been duly proposed, recommended by two or more companions of the Order, balloted for and approved. No Mason shall be exalted to this sublime degree unless he has been a Master Mason for 12 calendar months"

PROBATIONARY DEGREES

The reference to "*probationary degrees of Masonry,"* however, stems from as far back as 1744 and was used by Dr. Fifield D'Assigny in his Serious and Impartial Enquiry " referring to the Royal Arch in the following manner:

"Now as the land marks of the constitution of Free-Masonry are universally the same throughout all kingdoms, and are so well fixt that they will not admit of removal, how comes it to pass that some have been led away with ridiculous innovations, an example, of which, I shall prove by a certain propagator of a false system some few years ago in this city, who imposed upon several very worthy men under a pretence of being Master of the Royal Arch, which he asserted he had brought with him from the city of York; and that the beauties of the Craft did principally consist in the knowledge of this valuable piece of Masonry. However he carried on his scheme for several months, and many of the learned and wise were his followers, till at length his fallacious art was discovered by a Brother of probity and wisdom, who had some small apace before attained that excellent part of Masonry in London and plainly proved that his doctrine was false; whereupon the Brethren justly despised him and ordered him to be excluded from all benefits of the Craft, and although some of the fraternity have expressed an uneasiness at this matter being kept a secret from them (since they had already passed through the usual degrees of probation). I cannot help being of opinion that they have no right to any such benefit until they make a proper application, and are received with due formality, and as it is an organised body of men who have passed the chair, and given undeniable proofs of their skill in Architecture, it cannot be treated with too much reverence, and more especially since the characters of the present members of that particular Lodge are untainted, and their behaviour judicious and unexceptionable; so that there cannot be the least hinge to hang a doubt on, but that they are most excellent Masons."

This book has long been viewed as the earliest reference to the Royal Arch, but certain documents relating to Inquisitorial trials in Lisbon in August 1738 - held three months after the issue of the Papal Bull forbidding all Roman Catholics from Freemasonry have now been translated by Masonic students in that field, giving us much earlier indications of a grade above Master. Part of that evidence is as follows:

"He said further, that all those of the said society, not only of this Court, but from any other part of the world, should they come here, would know each other by the handclasp and in the movements they make with the right hand, those of the first class, or apprentice, bringing it up to the throat, those of the second to the breast, and he cannot explain their name in our tongue, but they are the next to becoming Masters, and those of the third bring the hand to the waist, and those who are Masters have a trowel, and there are two which they call Excellent Masons, and Grand Mason, which are above all others and superior to that which he, the witness, exercised."

"He said further, that unless they were skilled and informed in those arts of ruling and architecture, and in all else made known to them in the said society, no one of the said society can aspire to any of those superior degrees nor have knowledge of their origins, because this is forbidden to him."

I need hardly point out the similarity between this evidence and parts of what we read in Doctor D'Assigny's book published nearly six years later.

Even though Craft installations were held every six months, i.e. St. John the Baptist Day, June 24 and on St. John the Evangelist Day, December 27, the desire to enter the Royal Arch for many would have been unfulfilled and it became commonplace for lodges to confer the status of Past Master for this purpose. This caused the following to be minuted by the Antients Grand Lodge on December 4, 1771:

"The Rt. Worship. Deputy Grand Master informed the Grand Lodge of the Proceedings of the Royal Arch meetings, Viz. on the 2nd October and 6th November last and expatiated a long time on the scandalous method pursued by most of the Lodges (on St. John's Days) in passing a Number of Brethren through the chair on purpose to obtain the sacred Mysterys of the Royal Arch, and proved in a concise manner that those proceedings were unjustifiable; therefore Moved for a Regulation to be made in order to Suppress them for the future."

PASSING THE CHAIR

"Passing the Chair" became an established custom prior to Exaltation in both jurisdictions and it continued after the Union, officially until 1823, and unofficially long after that in provincial lodges well away from London; the Antients conferred the Virtual Past Master's Degree in a Craft Lodge but the Moderns Grand Chapter authorized it to be done in private chapters, and as our authority we take Waller Rodwell Wright, 2nd Grand Principal in 1810, who wrote:

"I have only to add that we consider the main secrets of the R.A. as those of the true M.M. to which we must pass from the substituted ones by filling the chair of a lodge consisting of three P.M's. at least by their election and appointment, which preparatory lodge any R.A. chapter may hold under its charter for that purpose only." (Broadly, Freemasonry in Malta, p.109)

The ceremonial for "Passing the Chair" certainly varied, but one form, taken from Manuscript, R.A. Chapter o f St. James, gives an idea how the ceremony was conducted by R.A. Companions.

The lodge was opened in the three degrees, the P.S. acting as master, the candidate occupied one of the warden's chairs. He was proposed as W.M. and after election took an obligation at the pedestal. He was raised, placed in the chair, and (I quote) **"exercised the duties of W.M."** He was then taken to the pedestal, and the P.S. still acting as W.M. said:

"The part of the ceremony you have just undergone previously to that of exaltation is for the purpose of complying with the ancient ordinancies of Royal Arch Masonry. Formerly the secrets and privileges of this exalted degree could only be communicated to those who had been regularly installed into the Chair of a Craft Mason's Lodge. But as this regulation necessarily excluded a great number of zealous Brethren from the enjoyment of these privileges, the Grand Principals of our Order have been pleased to grant a dispensation to meet the wishes of those Brethren who might not have an opportunity of being elected to preside over a Lodge. We are by this empowered to admit such Brethren as Candidates for Arch Masonry as have passed regularly through the 3 degrees of Craft Masonry, who are 23 years of age, and who have been at least one year a M.M."

The candidate was then informed that the ceremony through which he had just passed did not entitle him to rank as a Past Master, or to wear the badge of a W.M. A further obligation was taken, the secrets of a Master of Arts and Sciences were communicated, after which the P.S. left the room to prepare the candidate prior to exaltation.

The duties of the "First Assistant Sojourner" in the Chapter of St. James - as stated in their By-laws of 1812 were as follows:

"Should be punctual to the hour of meeting, as specified in the summons; and, in case of exaltation, take the chair as master of the previous Lodge, and open the same in due form, in the third degree, in which situation it is strongly recommended to his attention the most impressive order and solemnity in conducting the business of the Lodge, which should always be closed with an appropriate charge, and then prepare the Candidates for the ceremony of exaltation, according to ancient usage."

It is interesting to note that the M.E.Z. of this chapter, on June 11, 1801, announced that two of their members had been appointed superintendents for Essex and Hampshire respectively and, as the laws of Grand Chapter required them to be past principals,

"he would ask permission to call a special Chapter of Emergency that they might be installed and pass the several chairs, in order to qualify them for discharging the functions of their exalted situations."

On June 25 those two companions passed the several chairs and *"were respectively entrusted with the several signs and words thereto belonging."*

On May 13, 1818 Grand Chapter appointed a special committee to install such present and past principals (high priests in the U.S.) as had not already been installed. Finally, on August 2, 1824 it was resolved:

"That no Companion shall be eligible to be elected into either of the Principals' Chairs of a Chapter, unless he be the actual Master or Past Master of a Craft Lodge; nor shall anyone be elected into the Second Chair until he has duly served in the Third Chair, nor in the First Chair, until he shall have duly served in the Third, and Second, for the full period, from one annual election to another respectively."

and that is the situation exactly as we have it today.

LINK BETWEEN CRAFT AND ROYAL ARCH

When the Craft adopted the Hiramic legend it sowed the seed for an expansion of the ritual which would provide for the recovery of the Word which, incidentally, was never lost.
In the Craft it is asserted that the pronunciation of the Ineffable Name of the Almighty was known to the three Grand Masters and this was spoken by them, in a particular manner, when they met together for this purpose. We all know the challenge of the assassins to Hiram Abif when they demanded the secrets of a Master Mason, which met with the reply:

"that without the consent and co-operation of the other two he neither could nor would divulge them, but intimated that he had no doubt patience and industry would, in due time entitle the worthy Mason to a participation of them "

With the death of Hiram the "treble voice" was silenced and the substitute words were then brought into being. The ritual compilers at that point had only to look at the Table of Names and their meanings, printed in the Barker Bible dated 1580, for a word that was readymade for their purpose, the word (a proper name) appears in 1 Chronicles 2:49, and has, amongst other explanations or meanings, *"The smiting of the builder,"* or, in modern parlance, *"the builder is smitten."*

We have no record that the WORD was ever used in Craft ritual but it does appear on the *"Master's Floor Plan"* printed in various exposures dated c. 1745. The Word is there prominently displayed on the coffin and in the index is described as the *"Former Word of a Master"* In the *"Master's Catechism"* of that same period (Le Sceau Rompu-1745) we find the following:

Q. What come you here to do?
A. To seek for that which was lost.
Q. What is that which was lost?
A. The Master's Word.
Q. How was it lost?
A. By three great knocks, or the death of Adoniram (sic).
Q. How was our very worthy Master Adoniram assassinated?
A. By three ruffians, who conspired to extort the word from him or take his life.

This catechism goes on until the final question which is:

Q. What did he order to be placed on his tomb?
A. A gold Medal, in triangular form, on which was engraved the word JEOVA (sic) which is the name of God in Hebrew.

In the Royal Arch the *"treble voice"* is restored and the purpose is made clear to us all in the familiar words:

"This Supreme Degree inspires its members with the most exalted ideas of God and leads to the exercise of the purest and most devout piety, a reverence for the incomprehensible JEHOVAH, the eternal ruler of the Universe, the elemental life, the primordial source of all its principles, the very spring and fount of all its virtues."

and that, Companions, I deem to be the essence of our whole Masonic exercise.
It is a practice that transcends any one religious observance but stems from a Supreme Being whose Name, as such, has indeed been lost to us all but will be regained in due time, when we are duly qualified to receive.