

Saturday, June 21, 2008

The Necessity of the Royal Arch Degree to the Master Mason

The system of Masonic degrees, as now practiced, is the product of an evolution. Prior to 1717 there is no record that Freemasonry consisted of more than one degree. The symbolism, the beautiful lecture, the ornate diction, with which we find it clothed today, represents the growth and development from the crude and transition stage of past centuries. Strictly speaking, there was no degree from the dawn of Freemasonry until it began to take on the speculative feature. The Mason, prior to the 'Revival' of 1717, was designated as an Apprentice, Fellowcraft, or Master, not because of any special ceremony or degree work, but because of the length of time of service and skill manifested in his handicraft. The Ancient Charges and Regulations, as read to the apprentices, referred to the duties they owed to each other, to the lodge and the Holy Church. It is even doubted by some of our best historians that the grip and password were connected with these ancient ceremonies.

The introduction of the speculative Mason prepares the way for the dawn of Freemasonry. The so-called 'Revival' of 1717 was but the bursting forth of the evolutionary forces that had been slowly developing for half a century. These same forces are at work today, so that it can truly be said that Freemasonry is a progressive science. Masonic historians are agreed that some time between 1723 and 1730 the Second and Third degrees were evolved, and in the evolution of degrees, ritualism and symbolism were developed, resulting in the intellectual and philosophical Freemasonry of today. The central idea of the entire system of Freemasonry became the "loss" and the "recovery" of the "Word," symbolizing death and the resurrection, the ending of the present and the beginning of the future life.

The Royal Arch stands as the rainbow of promise of the resurrection; of that which was lost and that which shall be recovered. In our present ritual of the Third Degree the Master's Word is lost - the "Word" was never lost but transferred to the Royal Arch. Before the legend of Hiram Abif was introduced in the Master's Degree the True Word was communicated in the Master's Degree and not a substitute Word. It necessarily followed that when the legend of HA became a part of the ritual of this degree the "loss" of the "Word" followed, as the "loss" is a part of the Hiram legend. But the "loss" without a "recovery" would be an absurdity; to complete the symbolism of Freemasonry, the "Word" must be recovered, hence the necessity for a Fourth Degree, the Royal Arch. In 1738, or earlier, the story of the loss of the "Word" and the new legend, the Royal Arch, were gradually introduced into the lodges, and when the Freemasonry of England was divided into the 'Moderns' and 'Ancients' (in 1751), the latter organizing a Grand Lodge and adopting ritual of four degrees, the fourth being the Royal Arch. The Grand Lodge of 'Moderns' evidently continued to use the old ritual, without the legend of HA, while the Grand Lodge of 'Ancients' used the new ritual containing the Hiram legend and the Fourth Degree, until the year 1813, when the two Grand Lodges united and formed the present United Grand Lodge of England. It is therefore to the Grand Lodge of Ancients that we owe the Master's degree as found in our ritual and also the preservation of the Royal Arch degree. We see, therefore, that the Royal Arch is merely the evolution of a truth contained in the early Third Degree.

The Master Masons Degree without the Royal Arch is a story half told, a song half sung and a promise unfulfilled. The candidate is promised that he should receive, but is put off with a "substitute." He is left in darkness, in doubt, and to the thoughtful one, in a condition of disappointment. Yet, there is a purpose behind this seeming deception. Light and revealed Truth come only through toil and willing service. This lesson must be learned before any Mason is qualified to know and to appreciate the Truth, the Master's Word. It is, possibly, unfortunate that the Royal Arch Degree was separated from the "Blue Degrees" - but fortunate or unfortunate - the Royal Arch stands as the last of the degrees in Ancient Craft Masonry. It is the summit, and no Master Mason is in

possession of all that Freemasonry teaches without the Royal Arch. The series of four degrees continued to be conferred under a lodge charter until about 1750, in America at least. The earliest history that we have of the Royal Arch in this country was in 1753, when it was conferred under lodge charter in Fredericksburg, Virginia. It was introduced into New York about the same time by an English military lodge, and into Massachusetts in 1769, where it was conferred in St. Andrew's Lodge. Since that time the Royal Arch Degree has remained secure in its superior place.

The term "Royal Arch Lodge" was succeeded by "Chapter" and "Royal Arch Chapter." The word "Chapter" was used in Connecticut as early as September 5, 1783; in Pennsylvania, September 5, 1789; in New York, April 29, 1791; in Massachusetts, December 19, 1794. The word "Chapter" took the place of "Lodge" in England for the first time, April 29, 1768. The word "Companion," used in the Chapter in place of "Brother," was first used in England in 1778. These terms Chapter and Companion were soon carried to America, where they flourished as elements in the Capitular system of degrees.

Such, in brief, is the history of the Royal Arch Degree. Its parentage is as legitimate as any of the degrees of Ancient Craft Masonry - the fruit of symbolism and allegory. To be a Master Mason is the highest and most honorable degree that any man can attain - it entitles him to all the rights and privileges of the Craft - all the accumulated so-called higher degrees do not add anything to his Masonic stature. The Royal Arch is a part of the Master's Degree - the summit of its excellency. It is the privilege and should be the duty of all Master Masons to complete the Masonic story, told in allegory and revealed in symbolism, by receiving the Royal Arch.

To be 'exalted' as one living in that future generation that shall discover IT - Act now. Talk to your local RA Chapter, or if already a member then propose a new candidate.