

The Degree of Past Master



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Of the

GRAND CHAPTER OF ROYAL ARCH MASONS OF MINNESOTA

The Degree of PAST MASTER

- HISTORICAL -

The term “Past Master,” as generally used in Masonic circles, means one who has been elected and installed, and has served for the appointed time over a lodge. This general use of the term does not imply separate degree, although in many Grand Lodges the honorary grade of past master is conferred upon master-elect in connection with their installation, and such a ceremony was or is performed only in the presence of those who are themselves Past Masters. In the old days certain instructions were given, and certain secrets imparted, known as “the secrets of the chair,” which were considered necessary to fit the new master for his responsibilities.

To account for our present degree another idea must be added to that already mentioned, namely, that no man should be advanced to the Royal Arch degree unless he had first held the office of Master and been given the “secrets of the chair.” Evidently, as interest increased in capitular Masonry, this tradition became a burden, and a hindrance to the growth of membership in the Chapter degrees, as well as placing an undue restriction upon many worthy brethren of the craft. Gradually the requirement was relaxed by various methods. A ruling of Jerusalem Chapter, Philadelphia, in 1789 illustrates this gradual change: “No brother can be exalted until he has been at least three years a Master Mason and has presided six months as Master of some regular warranted lodge, or has passed the Chair by Dispensation.” Here we see a modification taking shape, permitting others than the actual Past Master to receive the degree of Royal Arch. Another old law, from Harmony Lodge, No. 52, of Philadelphia, in 1799, stated:

“Every brother who has not passed the Chair shall pay fourteen dollars, out of which the dispensation shall be paid for; if he has passed the Chair, for being exalted, eight dollars.” That is, an actual Past Master could receive the Royal Arch degree for eight dollars, but one who had not received the Past Master’s degree had to obtain a dispensation from the Grand Master to receive it, before he could be made a Royal Arch Mason, and the whole procedure cost him fourteen dollars.

Gradually the distinction grew up between an “Actual Past Master” and a “Virtual Past Master.” As the Royal Arch degree passed from the control of the lodge and became part of a separate system, now known as the “Chapter,” the holding of the Past Master’s degree still remained a prerequisite to the Royal Arch, and to meet the requirements, the “virtual” degree of Past Master became one of the Chapter degrees. In Pennsylvania, the grand lodge has claimed and exercised exclusive jurisdiction over the degree, it has not usually been conferred in Royal Arch Chapters, and in 1926 the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania even went so far as to abolish the requirement of the Past Master’s degree as a prerequisite for the Royal Arch. As a result, the Grand Chapter of Pennsylvania has maintained its separate identity, and is not included in the General Grand Chapter International. Many Grand Chapters decline to receive a companion from Pennsylvania who has not received the Past Master’s degree, either as member or visitor, in a Royal Arch Chapter, until he shall have received the degree, or at least its obligation.

This degree is not part of the Royal Arch system in England, nor in the Canadian provinces which have joined our General Grand Chapter and is conferred in England under the name of “Installed Master,” only upon those who have actually presided over craft lodges. If the question is raised as to how long it has been a regular part of the American system of Royal Arch Chapters, the answer must be that its appearance seems to have been a gradual evolution, but that it was certainly established as the second degree of the series at the time of the organization of the “Grand Royal Arch Chapter of the Northern States of America,” in 1798, which organization later developed into our present General Grand Chapter.

- SYMBOLS –

The Degree of Past Master, though the briefest of the Chapter degrees, has a profound meaning, which is frequently overlooked. Within it are displayed and emphasized three of the most fundamental Masonic symbols, the square the gavel, and the Holy Bible.

The Square is the traditional badge of a Master, and reminds us to square our actions by the square of virtue, keeping our passions and prejudices within due bounds. In the previous degree the building stones have been tested by the square, but here a larger significance is given to this important tool of the operative mason. We must not only be good, true and square within, but we are taught to regulate our conduct justly and perfectly toward all, especially toward our brethren of the fraternity. And this is most important in those who find themselves in any position of authority or responsibility among others.

The Gavel symbolizes authority and in the hand of one chosen to rule the craft, it is an emblem of power. Like the mallet of the preceding degree, necessary before a man can rule over others. “He who would rule must first learn the great lesson of obedience, and the observation of every obligation heretofore taken.” He only can teach who has passed through the severe school of discipline.” Self-Control, then, is the essential qualification of a ruler. How difficult such self-qualification is to attain, but how supremely valuable!

The Holy Bible, the “Great Light” in Masonry, lying open upon the altar, is here not only displayed, as in previous degrees, but is heavily emphasized. Without its presence and the dignity and solemnity it adds, the Master’s authority vanishes, and the lodge loses the standard needed for its guidance. Its golden rays of truth brighten the pathway of the craftsman; without this Book, he would have no guide. Masonry without an open Bible on the altar is unthinkable and impossible in our land. With good reason then we are taught to guard and defend this volume of sacred law as our most valued treasure. And this means not only keeping inviolate the actual volume itself, but guarding its contents within our own hearts.

We must know what the book contains, if we are to truly live according to its sublime precepts.” The Masonic bodies are not churches, and certainly not church schools; no pressure can or should be applied toward any special doctrinal or sectarian interpretation of the Bible; but each man should feel within himself a mature desire to read for himself in this “Book of books,” to find what light it has for him, for only so can he “faithfully direct his steps through life by the light he shall find therein.”

Combining the meanings of these symbols, certain very important lessons appear, as taught in this degree:

The first lesson, suggested by the reason assigned for the very existence of this degree, is obedience and respect for the law, not merely or Masonic law, but for all law, human and divine. “From first to last Masonry stands for law and order, and for the beauty of law and order, which in its moral culmination is the beauty of holiness.” It is the very opposite of anarchy and lawlessness. The moral law, the law of the country, the law of God, these must all be respected and obeyed. Our fraternity stands as a bulwark of organized society in its relation to God and man. “The family has no better friend, the Church of God no truer advocate, the State or government no more loyal supporter than the Lodge or Chapter whose members live as best they can up to the teaching of the order.” Such a life under law is not the life of a slave, who is the plaything of tyranny or oppression, but of the most truly free man. And this the ruler of the craft must learn, be he an actual or a “virtual” Past Master.

The second principal lesson of this degree is concerned with reward and its consequent responsibility. If true and diligent work is inculcated in the previous degree, then most appropriately is the just reward of diligence presented in this. The craftsman has become the Master. “Thou hast been faithful in a few things; I will make thee ruler over many things.” But such a reward carries with it responsibility, in this case for the conduct of the lodge. The necessary materials and information are presented to the newly promoted brother, and he is invested with supreme power, and severely tested in his new position. And here appears an important point.

Though the means are placed in his hands essential condition, according to the custom of certain chapters, is lacking for carrying it out, yet rare indeed is the candidate who handles the situation skillfully, discovering the lack and taking some immediate steps to remedy it.

How could we be taught more forcibly that the conscience, the moral Master of our lives, must be ever guided, not only by the square of mutual rights and duties and the gavel of control, but supremely by the illumination shed by the "Great Light," the Word of God? Only by the presence of such a light can we truly rule ourselves, to say nothing of ruling others. Without this light liberty become license and the rule of government becomes anarchy on the one hand or despotism on the other.

The degree of Past Master, then, with its lofty teachings of respect and obedience for law, reward for diligence, responsibility and self-control, even though brief, and often slighted, and not given the emphasis it deserves, has a well-earned and important place in the capitular system. Though its content has no historical connection with the other degrees of the Chapter, yet it does have "a close logical and ethical relation with that which precedes, and that which follows." Diligence has received its reward; privilege has brought with it its responsibilities; we are now ready to share in the dedication of the completed Temple, and to enjoy that rest and worship which will fit us for further progress.

In the following degree, that of Most Excellent Master, the candidate witnesses these events, the completion of the Temple and its consecration to God.

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