

## SOME MUSINGS ON THE DEGREE OF MARK MASTER



It would not be hard to make an argument that the Mark Master degree was developed during the formative stages of Speculative Masonry, and was intended to be included as a part of the working of the Fellow craft degree. Certainly, the setting of the degree begins with a Fellow craft as the central character; from an ethical and symbolic viewpoint this Fellow craft clearly advances in the degree from where he is left at the close of the Second degree. And there are some interesting parallels in the structure of both degrees.

For instance, the Lodge of Mark Master is opened for the purpose of advancing a candidate. This would only be possible for a Fellow craft since a Master Mason cannot be advanced to any degree and, in fact, has already proceeded beyond the lessons taught in the Mark degree. Further, the candidate is clothed as a Fellow craft and is preparing to have his work as a craftsman inspected by the overseers of the work. This occurs on the evening of the sixth day, the time when only the Fellow craft's reported each week to receive their wages. And, at a certain point in the degree, the candidate is asked if he is a Fellow craft and he answers, "I am, try me." Thus, one can easily conclude the Mark Master degree is a degree for the Fellow craft Mason.

But, as far as historical research is concerned, the earliest reference to a degree existing under the title of "Mark Master" occurs in the Minute Book of Royal Arch Friendship Chapter #3 held at the George Tavern in Portsmouth on September 1, 1769, forty-five years after the development of the trigradal degree system. The Provincial Grand Master, Thomas Dunkerly, made several Brothers Mark Masters, requiring each to choose his Mark. It is not known when or where Dunkerly received the degree. It is surmised that he may have received it while in the navy, where he had frequent opportunity to visit military lodges, many of them under Irish Constitutions. The degree does not surface in Scotland until 1787, and is not officially recognized in Ireland until 1845.

Dunkerly himself may well be the author. R. W. Bro. W. Redfern Kelly, an Irish Grand Chapter officer, wrote in 1917 that, in his opinion, Dunkerly invented the degree in 1767, shortly after the formation of the First Grand Royal Arch Chapter of England. Kelly also contends that Dunkerly may be the author of the Excellent Master degree.

There is one other possible theory. Some historians believe the "Marked Mason" degree may have been worked as a Heredom degree between the Fellow craft and Master Mason degree at some early stage of ritual development. But since essentially all other ritual workings of the early Speculative period were published almost immediately following their adoption, either by Masons themselves as aides to the memory work, or by non-Masons as exposures, it seems remarkable that such an "interim" degree would have slipped past the scrutiny of such exposes'.

We may never know, but we do know that Dunkerly had received the degree himself only shortly before his conferral of the same to the Brothers of Friendship Chapter #3. He wrote the Minutes in cipher himself, and made note of the fact that he had just lately received the Mark".

Regardless of its origin, today the degree as worked either in the Craft lodge, or in Royal Arch Chapters in essentially every jurisdiction that practices the York Rite system of degrees. In most cases, the Mark Master degree is a prerequisite of the Royal Arch.

In the Mark Master, we find the candidate off to have his work inspected and to receive the rewards which are due a craftsman who has produced well.

In the first section of the degree, he prepares to show a sample of his work for inspection but, finding a building stone of another workman which in his eyes, is more beautiful and fitting for the temple, he substitutes it for his own. Of course, the substituted stone, not being square and true, as required of the Fellow craft's, is rejected and thrown into the building rubbish. When the candidate then attempts to receive wages for work that is not his own, he is labeled an impostor and threatened with the punishment of having his right hand severed. He is saved by a friend who has worked in the quarries along side of him and can vouch that he is indeed a Fellow craft. The candidate is then sent back to the quarries to produce his own work and, when such work is again examined by the overseers, it is accepted. He is given wages and told that his work is indeed true and square, and of his own making.

In the second section, the candidate is clothed as a Master Mason and given the working tools of a Mark Master, which are the chisel and mallet. He is received into the lodge as a Mark Master and given his obligation. He is again challenged with a pledge he has just made and to which he cannot comply. But his brethren, when called upon, all offer to assist him in meeting his pledge.

In the final section of the degree, the workmen are distressed because the keystone cannot be found for the comer and, after a search, it turns out to be the stone the Fellow craft had originally given for examination to the overseers which they had subsequently tossed in the pile of building rubble. The stone was the work of Hiram Abiff, completed shortly before his death.

And thus we have the Mark Master degree, powerful in its symbolic content, and among the most interesting and important of all the degrees in Masonry. In the Mark Master, we find the candidate off in search of himself. As in all symbol systems of Masonry, he is on the Hero's quest. It is the search for the Holy Grail. It is the journey of the Master for the Lost Word. Our young Fellow craft sets out to build his temple within, so he may be transformed in the consciousness of God.

The esoteric theme of this degree is the Quest itself, and that which is being sought on the Quest. Indeed, it is typical of all the great Quest themes. The Hero sets out on a journey and first tries to identify himself with another person who has already passed whatever task, or test, is involved. The reason this element is found in so many of the Quest stories is that everyone needs a Hero, and we all try to emulate those whom we see as great examples. But we find that we must ultimately set aside that identification and go in search of ourselves. We cannot progress in life by imitation. We must make our mark only by personal development.

Further, in the Mark Master degree, the central element around which the story is based is the stone which the Fellow craft is to produce. All through Masonic tradition, the candidate is taught that he is engaged in the preparation of material and the actual process of building. Of course, what he is building is his own spiritual Temple, that "house not made with hands." He is a living stone; he is the building material. In preparing his stone, he is preparing himself, and becomes incorporated into the structure of self improvement the moment he steps into the lodge. He is both the builder and the building material. For this reason, the stone he produces must be his own work. We all must go back to the quarries many times until we learn how to find Perfection.

And in this degree, the working tools are tools used for shaping and molding that stone. We are all engaged in the work of perfecting our own ashlar. This is the work of the mind, which is what the ritual tells us the chisel represents. It takes knowledge and education to achieve perfection. The maul provides the means whereby we can keep our moral progress in balance as we shape our own life.

It is also interesting to note that the Mark Master receives as wages a coin. He has advanced by knowledge and education beyond the wages of corn, wine, and oil. Because of his advanced learning, he now has some freedom of choice in his decisions. The coin represents that instrument of exchange which enables him to select wisely the fruits of his own labor, and to make the best use of his learning.

The penalty of this degree also ties to the Fellow craft degree. When one remembers where the right hand is placed in the obligation of the Fellow craft, it is easy to see the inference to the penalty of the Mark Master. We are dealing here with the destruction of that which is abused, namely the rights and benefits of a Fellow-craft Mason for violating his obligations. In Masonry, the right hand is the hand of strength, the hand that does the work. When we do not live up to our duties as a Mason, we symbolically are divested with that which gives us the strength to build well.

Finally, there is the symbolism of throwing away the stone into the building rubbish and rediscovering it as the head of the corner. This stone is a symbol of the "Lost Word," which is never really lost. It is always present but we often fail to recognize it because it is outside our consciousness. When we reach that level of awareness where the "Word" (stone) is essential to our further progress in building our own Temple, we are able to discover it.

Just as the vacant space in the Arch foreshadows the Keystone, so the need for the Spiritual within us directs the way to that which can mark our improvement. Thus as a Mark Master, we are once again reminded that Masonry is a progressive science, attainable only by that insight and knowledge which comes from making the noble quest.

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