

THE ARK AND THE APRONS IN THE MEM

The central events commemorated in the Degree of Most Excellent Master are the completion and the dedication of the Temple that King Solomon erected in Jerusalem to God's Holy Service. In order to re-enact its completion, the Brethren, who of course represent the workmen engaged in the building, line up in two columns, which are led by the two Wardens. They march twice around the lodge room, that is, around the Temple, and then diverge, so that the Senior Warden's column is ranged along the South, and the Junior Warden's along the North. They halt and turn inwards, facing the Temple. Then the Master lays the keystone in its place in the arch, and sets it firm by three strokes of his gavel (which here serves as the setting maul). We are left with the impression that his effort is the final touch, binding together the principal arch and completing the sacred structure. The workmen are permitted to view the interior of the magnificent edifice, and express their wonder and admiration with appropriate gestures.



Then the Ark-bearers set the Ark of the Covenant in its new permanent home in the Holy of Holies, which is symbolically represented by the Arch. And you will note what a to-do they make about easing the Ark into place by means of the staves alone, without themselves touching it. Here you see a covert reference to another episode in the Volume of the Sacred Law, the story of Uzzah. On a previous occasion when the Ark was being transported, the oxen who were pulling the vehicle stumbled, and the Ark seemed a trifle unsteady. Uzzah put forth his hand to secure it, and was struck dead for his pains. We conclude from this that the Ark is not to be touched by human hands, unless you are specially consecrated. You will find the story recorded in the Sixth Chapter of the Second Book of Samuel.

At this point in our proceedings the Senior Warden and the Junior Warden deposit their aprons in front of the pillars of the Arch. This may at first sight seem shocking, because we are brainwashed into believing that a Freemason in open lodge must always be clothed with his leather apron. Then, while the Wardens stand naked, as it were, the candidate is received and acknowledged as a Most Excellent Master. The Wardens resume their aprons, and the Temple is dedicated. Now my question is this. Why all that business about the aprons? The clue is provided by the ode which was formerly sung at this juncture. You almost never see the musical ritual performed in Chapter any more, but here it provides an essential clue to what is going on. The first stanza runs like this:

*There is no more occasion
For level or plumb line,
For trowel or gavel,
For compass or square;
Our works are completed,
The Ark safely seated,
And we shall be greeted
As workmen most rare.
And the previous ode had said:
The cope-stone is finished,
Our labour is o'er;
The sound of the gavel
Shall hail us no more.*

That is, the work is finished. The last stone has been cut, and the mason cutters have left the quarries. The last stone has been laid, and the mason setters have dismantled the scaffolding. The implements of labour are ready to be laid to rest. All the masons can at last divest themselves of the aprons they have worn for seven long years to protect their garments from spot or stain. To be sure, it would want too much time for every Brother actually to remove his apron, so instead the two leaders, the Wardens, act as their representatives. When they unclothe themselves, we are meant to visualize all the Brethren removing their working garb. The Wardens place their aprons in front of the completed structure, as a symbolic gesture that the labours are over.

It was on this occasion, the Historical Lecture informs us, that "King Solomon determined to bestow some distinguishing mark upon the skilful and zealous builders who had been engaged in its construction." And so it is now, between the completion and the dedication of the Temple, that the Order of Merit, the Degree of Most Excellent Master, is conferred upon the Candidate.

Then the Wardens re-clothe themselves. Once again, they act on behalf of all the Masons, who are to be thought of as all resuming their aprons. This time, however, it is no longer for toil, but in order that, as builders whose task is done, clothed in workmen's uniforms of spotless white, they may observe, and even participate in, the dedication of the Temple they have just finished building.

And that is why the Wardens are permitted to stand unclothed in open lodge for a few minutes, having deposited their aprons on the ground.

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