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## MASTER'S PIECE.

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In the olden time it was no easy matter for a man to become a Freemason. He had to win the right by hard work, technical skill, and personal worth. Then, as now, he had to prove himself a free man of lawful age and legitimate birth, of sound body and good repute, to be eligible at all. Also he had to bind himself to serve under rigid rules for seven years, his service being at once a test of his character and a training for his work. If he proved incompetent or unworthy he was sent away.

The rules by which an Apprentice pledged himself to live, as we find them in the Old Charges, were very strict. He has first to confess his faith in God, vowing to honour the Church, the State, and the Master under whom he served, agreeing not to absent himself from the service of the Order, save with the license of the Master. He must be honest and upright, faithful in keeping the secrets of the Craft, and the confidence of his fellows. He must be obedient to the Master without argument or murmuring, respectful to all Freemasons, avoiding uncivil speech, free from slander and dispute. Such was the severe rule under which the Apprentice learned the art and secrets of the Craft.

After seven years of study and discipline, either in the Lodge or at the Annual Assembly, where Awards were usually made, he presented his "MASTER'S PIECE" - some bit of stone or metal carefully carved, for the inspection of the Master, saying, "Behold my experience" by which he meant the sum of his experiments. As a Apprentice he had spoiled many a bit of stone; he had dulled the edge of many a tool; he had spent laborious nights and days, and the whole was in that tiny bit of work. His MASTER'S PIECE was carefully examined by the Masters assembled; and if it was approved he was made a Master Mason, entitled to take his kit of tools and go out as a workman, a Master and Fellow of his Craft - not however until he had selected a Mark by which his work could be identified, and renewed his vows to the Order.

Masonry was not invented; it grew. To-day it unfolds its wise and good and beautiful truth in three noble and impressive degrees, and no man can take them to heart and not be enobled and enriched by their dignity and beauty. The first lays emphasis upon that fundamental righteousness without which a man is not a man, but a medley of warring passions - that purification of heart which is the basis alike of life and religion. The second degree lays stress upon the culture of the mind, the training of its faculties in the quest of knowledge, without which man remains a child. The Third seeks to initiate us, symbolically, into the eternal life, making us victors over death before it arrives. The First is the Degree of Youth, the Second the Degree of Manhood, the Third the consolation and conquest of Old Age, when the evening shadows fall and the Eternal World and its unknown adventure draw near.

What then, for each of us to-day, is meant by the MASTER'S PIECE? Is it simply a quaint custom handed down from our ancient brethren, in which we learn how an Apprentice was made a Master of his Craft? It is that indeed, but much more. Unless we have eyes to see a double meaning everywhere in Masonry, a moral application and a spiritual suggestion, we see little or nothing. But if we have eyes to see, it is always a parable, an allegory, a symbol; and the Master's Piece of olden times becomes an emblem of that upon which every man is working all the time and everywhere, whether he is aware of it or not, his character, his personality, by which he will be tested and tried at the last. Character, as the word means, is something carved, something wrought out of the raw stuff and hard material of life. All we do, all we think, goes into the making of it.

No one of us is strong enough not to need the companionship of good men, and the consecration of great ideals. Here lies perhaps the deepest meaning and value of Masonry. It is a fellowship of men seeking goodness; and to yield ourselves to its influence, to be drawn into its spirit and quest, is to be made better than ourselves.

Amid such influences each of us his making, his MASTER'S PIECE. God is all the time refining, polishing, with strokes now tender, now terrible. That is the meaning of pain, sorrow, death. It is the Chisel of the Master cutting the rough stone. How hard the mallet strikes! But the stone becomes a pillar, an arch, perhaps an altar emblem. The masterpiece of life, at once the best service to man and the fairest offering to God, is a pure, faithful, heroic, beautiful Character.

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