

Fourth Degree: Secret Master

It is unclear, simply by looking at the title of this degree, what it means. This is due to the ambiguity of the word "secret." It can function either as a noun or as an adjective. If "secret" is a noun, "Secret Master" could refer to one who has mastered secrets or is the master of a particular secret. A similar phrase might be "Secret Keeper." If "secret" functions as an adjective, "Secret Master" might refer to one who is secretly a master of something, as opposed to one who is publicly a master of something. In this case, a similar phrase might be "Hidden Master." Both interpretations are appropriate, as I will show in my analysis of the materials for this degree from Albert Pike's, *Morals and Dogma*.

Pike's lecture for this degree is divided into five main thematic sections, which I will paraphrase in my own words.

- i. Inadequacy of common interpretations of Masonic symbols
- ii. Importance of attainment of knowledge as the goal of life
- iii. Indispensable nature of secrecy for a Mason
- iv. Duty of obedience to the law of the people
- v. Importance of faithfulness to our promises and in other areas

It doesn't take long before a Mason has heard, over and over again, that Masonry is "a system of morality, veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols." This phrase, which has been used so often as to be almost meaningless, promises the acquisition of lessons that can be obtained nowhere but in the recesses of the Masonic lodge. Particularly the use of the word "veiled" conjures up thoughts of ancient and mystical knowledge, attached to esoteric symbols and hieroglyphs, the key to which only Masons have. For those who seek the knowledge of the ages the first three Degrees must appear shallow at best, and barren at worst. Indeed, "the performance has not come up to the promise" (*Morals and Dogma*, p. 106), and the lessons in morality taught in the lectures are primitive and offer no information that couldn't be had from a child's Sunday School. The scientific lessons are likewise rudimentary, and the candidate is left thinking that there simply must be more to the Forty-seventh Problem of Euclid than, "Eureka! I have

found it!ö For those who are satisfied with the lessons of the first three Degrees, as they are presented, no more is needed. But for those who feel disappointment in them, fear not! More will be revealed as one progresses in the Degrees of the Scottish Rite.

Remember that the symbols of Freemasonry have been used throughout the ages not to *reveal* the esoteric knowledge sought by so many, but to *conceal* it. As these teachings have been passed down to us, the ceremonies and lessons have been diminished to cater to the lowest common intellectual denominator of both Masters and Initiates. And although the lessons of the Craft now stand as öbroken columns of a roofless Druidic templeö (*M&D*, p. 106), they are still the first steps toward the inner sanctuary of real, hidden, and important knowledgeö the first steps toward Truth. A desire for more Masonic Light is the first requirement of the candidate, followed by ösecrecy, obedience, and fidelityö (*M&D*, p. 107).

The teachings that are commonly called the öworkö of Masonry must be followed back through time, as one follows a gushing river to its source, if one is to truly become a Mason. A few sentences about architecture, the five senses, and the seven Liberal Arts will not satisfy the true seeker of wisdom. Let he who is already satisfied go no further. The true Mason will fervently continue the search for knowledge.

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As Masons we seek to come out of our darkness and approach the light. Metaphorically speaking, Knowledge is Light, just as Ignorance is Darkness. No wonder, then, that when we learn something new, or finally understand a concept, we often say, öI see.ö Just as light is necessary for the growth of all life, so is knowledge necessary for the growth of the soul. If the soul seeks immortality, then the acquisition of knowledge does indeed afford one a kind of immortality. For when we die we hope that people will not merely remember our names, but our *works*: of art, literature, benefits to society, acts of creation. Monuments of genius are more lasting than monuments of stone. What is more, knowledge can be spread through teaching to others. Enlightening one's fellow creatures is the öimpulse of a noble nature, and the worthiest work of manö (*M&D*, p. 108).

Those who are satisfied, and wish to learn no more, should stop here. But he who wishes to approach the summit of learning, and thereby get closer to the light, let him prepare himself for the struggle. For the path is rough and rugged; secrecy, obedience,

and fidelity are needed to resist the temptations to turn from the path which leads to wisdom.

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One of the first lessons we are taught upon our initial entrance into the Lodge is that of secrecy. It is absolutely necessary in a Mason. The obligations we take at the altar bind us, one to another, with the strongest ties. For we have promised to fly to the aid of a Brother in peril, even at the risk of our own lives. How terrible it would be, then, if a man who was *not* bound to us by the Mystic Tie, who had *not* experienced for himself the beauties of our Brotherhood, who had *not* sworn to aid and assist us in our need, should find out the secrets of our Craft and use them in a time of peril for his own benefit with no intention of returning the favor in our own hour of distress.

But our obligation to secrecy extends beyond the confines of the lodge room. Any confidence shared with us by a Brother must remain sacred within our hearts, unless keeping that secret goes against the laws of our country.

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The laws which we are called upon to obey are those which rightfully come from the will of the people. Those which come down from tyrants and despots, or which are contrary to God or the laws of Nature, and violate the rights of free thought, free speech, and free conscience, we can (and must) rebel against. Despots and tyrants, whether temporal or spiritual, do not deserve our submission or adulation. Unfortunately, history is full of examples of human souls bowing down to blood-thirsty and oppressive Power. But while we can force our knees to bend and our tongues to praise falsely, we cannot force our hearts to see vices as virtues or criminals as gods. Laws which emanate from the will of the people, and are an expression of the people's judgment, are consistent with the laws of God and are therefore to be followed. While they may not address the private interests of the individual, they promote the general welfare. As such, each is obligated to follow such laws, for they reflect the divine laws of God and Nature.

The Fourth Degree is in large part concerned with teaching obedience to the true and original law (*M&D*, p. 110), which is the same in all countries and cannot be ignored or changed by man. We learn in this degree that to disobey this law is not only to go against God, but to go against our own nature. Thus, as we are a country of laws of the

people, and therefore based upon the Original Law, we are strictly to obey the laws of our country. We are not to mistake our passions and prejudices for conscience, but instead to dispassionately and objectively seek to do what is right and just for all.

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In the performance of our duties we must be careful what we promise and vow. When once given a promise must be kept. It would be more desirable not to make a promise in the first place, than to make it and then not keep it. Especially a promise to God, for God is in heaven and sees and hears all that happens on earth. There should be nothing so convenient or important that it would make a Mason forego a promise he has made. Therefore, the true Mason will hold his tongue and not rashly blurt out a pledge, for once spoken, a pledge must be honored, or else he is false to his God, his country, his Fraternity, and himself. A broken promise robs one of honor and integrity, so be faithful to the promises you make; to your family, as a husband, father, son, and brother; to your friends; to your country; and to Freemasonry.

Masons are men of honor and integrity. They prefer duty above all else. They are independent in their opinions and morally upright. The Mason is devoted to his country, his family, and to all mankind. He is willing to do all in his power to benefit others. The true Secret Master will not take this title lightly, but will strive to live up to it.

One of the challenges facing all Masons is how to take the lessons learned in the lodge and make them part of his daily life. If the lodge is a symbol of the world, then we can take the lessons learned within the tyled recesses of the lodge to the world outside. Two of the main lessons taught in the Fourth Degree are secrecy and duty.

I was recently mentoring a young Entered Apprentice, going over the obligation of the first degree with him, when we came to the section about not revealing any of the secrets, arts, parts, or points of the hidden mysteries of Freemasonry. What exactly are the secrets? he asked. I told him that on a very elementary level, the secrets of Freemasonry are the grips, words, obligations, rituals, and, to a lesser extent, the private business of the lodge that goes on during the meetings. Basically, I said, imagine that your family or your church got together for a business meeting. It wouldn't be

appropriate to discuss the details of that meeting with people who weren't part of that group.

“But,” he said, “there are hundreds of books and web sites and even TV shows that reveal the grips, words, penalties, and rituals. So how can we still call them secrets?” I told him that I'd had the same questions and had done a lot of thinking about it. By way of explaining it, I asked him what he would do if he discovered that other people knew the password to his ATM card. He said he'd change it immediately. Exactly! I said. But even though the words, grips, rituals, and other “secrets” of Freemasonry have also been made public, we don't change them. Why don't we?

Because those things aren't really the point of Freemasonry. It's kind of fun to know secret handshakes and passwords, but these things are only vehicles to teach a larger, more important lesson: that of secrecy, in the sense of keeping a confidence. For example, I was a Mason long before I met my wife, and eventually she asked me what some of the so-called secrets are. “Well,” I told her, “if you really want to know, you can get online or go to the library and find out. But you won't find them out from me because I put my hand on a Bible and swore I wouldn't reveal them.” This attitude of not divulging those things you said you wouldn't is the mark of a Mason, and it lets those around you know that you're a man it is safe to confide in. Although it was probably somewhat frustrating for my wife, I'm sure on a deeper level she was glad to know that I'm a man who keeps his word.

Do you remember, I asked my young Entered Apprentice friend, how you were first received into the lodge at your initiation? He said he did. *That* is the point of Masonic secrecy, I said. We're taught to keep confidential a few things that really don't matter as practice for keeping confidential those things that really *do* matter. And should we ever let slip the secrets of a friend, family member, or Brother, the knowledge of our betrayal should sting our conscience and heart the way that sharp instrument once did.

Often, to play down the secret aspects of Freemasonry, one hears the saying, “It's not a secret society; it's a society with secrets.” I prefer to think that Freemasonry is indeed a secret society, but not in the sense of some shadowy, covert organization with designs on world conquest. Rather, I think of Freemasonry as secret society in that it is a society of friends and Brothers among whom it is safe to confide one's secrets.

A second lesson taught to all Secret Masters is that of duty. Duty is with us always, imperative as destiny. With these words the candidate learns that duty is with us at all times, wherever we go, whether we acknowledge it or not. It is not something that we can escape. In an age when duty is considered by many to be a four-letter word, the lessons of this degree are particularly timely and important. We are bombarded daily with messages that encourage us to take the path of least resistance; to put off until later what should be done now; and to shirk our duties for the sake of pleasure and convenience. Now, more than ever, the teachings of the Fourth Degree are needed to combat this epidemic of selfishness pervading our society. A man must hear, from other men of good morals, that it is *not* acceptable to live only for himself. He must hear that his duties must be performed, not in the hopes of a reward or recognition, but for the sake of duty itself. This is what makes a man a Mason.

In the essay for the Fourth Degree, Albert Pike presents specific duties we owe to our family, our friends, our country, and the Fraternity. His language is beautiful and eloquent, and the lessons, written so long ago, still apply today.

To our family we owe perhaps the greatest duty as men. Being a family man means to inhabit several roles, primarily as a husband and father. As a husband I strive to be faithful to my wife, not just in sexual matters (although that is very important) but in my everyday thoughts and actions. After all, she is the one person on this planet that I am closest to, the one person I chose out of billions of people to spend this life with, and even more incredibly, considering all of my faults the one who agreed to spend this life with me. After many years together it is so easy to become self-centered and stop actively caring about the feelings of one's partner. We must never forget that even the tiniest word or look can either build up or break down this central relationship in our lives.

As a father it is my duty to love my young sons with all my heart. This means not only playing with them, laughing with them, hugging and kissing them, and helping them explore the world, but also giving them the foundations they need to eventually go into the world as good men, who will make the right choices for themselves and those around them. This means teaching them responsibility by letting them experience the consequences of their decisions; praising them when they do well, but allowing them to deal with the fact that they won't always be successful in everything they try; insisting on

courtesy and respect toward others, especially their elders; and letting them know that no matter what they do, their dad will always love them. I may not always agree with them, but I will always love them. As my wise father said to me, when I was starting to make some very poor choices in high school, "Son, I'll love you whether you're in prison or out of prison. Nothing will stop my love. And if you do go to prison, well I'll be sure to send a care package." Boy did that wake me up!

As a friend, it is my duty to be there when needed. More often than not, we have fun with our friends and spend our time together in enjoyment. But sometimes "life happens", as they say, and things are not all smiles and laughter. In such cases, friends are needed more than ever, and as Masons we are to be a safe harbor from the storm. A few years ago, a friend saw his life turned upside down due to his own actions. Many of his "friends" fell away, perhaps not wanting to associate with someone who could make such bad decisions. But it is our duty as Masons to remember that we *all* make bad decisions, and if we haven't had our own lives turned upside down, it's through no virtue of our own, but only by the grace of God. It's not our job to sit in judgment of one another, but to be there for each other. My friend didn't need me to tell him, either with my words or my actions, that he messed up. He knew that full well. What he needed was someone to talk to and turn to. The true Mason is not a fair-weather friend.

To our country we owe our allegiance and an active participation in her fortunes. It is our duty as citizens, and especially as Masons, to take part in the sacred "yes, sacred" act of making our voice heard: voting. It's easy to forget that the transfer of power from one party to another is an event fraught with violence and bloodshed in so many parts of the world. Yet from that momentous occasion when power was transferred from Washington to Adams, the transition in this country has been mostly peaceful, so it's easy for us to take it for granted. It's also easy to take our freedoms for granted and not be vigilant in protecting them. We cannot assume that our leaders will always jealously guard our rights; we must watch them and hold them accountable. As our Brother Benjamin Franklin said, "Those who would give up Essential Liberty to purchase a little Temporary Safety, deserve neither Liberty nor Safety." Our sacred duties as citizens are also our unique rights as Americans: to vote and, if necessary, to protest. As Masons we must always stand up for what's right for our country, even if it's not popular,

and make our voices heard. There will always be those who try to shout down the voice of truth and reason, forgetting that the most un-American thing you can say is, "You can't say that."

Our duty to Freemasonry is the same duty we owe to all humankind, for Freemasonry has the best interests of the world at its core: the brotherhood of man under the fatherhood of God. Again, we are taught that the Lodge is a representation of the world at large. How wonderful it would be if that were true! Imagine a world where men of all colors and creeds, nationalities and backgrounds, religions and beliefs, could come together in harmony, bow their heads and pray to God, and then set about the work of improving the world. This happens in the lodge! As Masons, our duty to the Fraternity is first and foremost to strive to live out and exemplify the teachings of the lodge. The world must see that Masons are men of good morals, upright and true to their word. A second duty is to be active in the lodge. A man who only carries a dues card but does not attend meetings or participate in the business of the lodge is not a true Mason. By being true to the teachings of the Craft and being active participants in the work of Freemasonry, we can spread the light of brotherhood around the world.

In conclusion, it is not enough to hear the words spoken in lodge or read them on a page and forget about them. We must ponder them and struggle with their meaning, with the hope of eventually internalizing them and making positive changes in our lives. A man is on his way to becoming a true Secret Master if he learns the two main lessons of the Fourth Degree. With an ability to hold inviolable the secrets of the Craft and a worthy Brother, he will be a Secret Master in the sense of "Secret Keeper." And by knowing his duties and doing them without hope of any reward, recognition, or accolades from others, he will quietly and without boasting become the master of himself—a Secret Master in the sense of "Hidden Master." This degree offers enough work for a lifetime. Yet it is only the beginning of the climb toward the light.

Onward and upward!