

The Black Cube

”A WHITE ball elects, a black cube (or ball) rejects.”

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This, or some similar statement, is usually made at a lodge prior to voting on the application of one who would be an initiate of Freemasonry.

In all Jurisdictions in the United States, the ballot on an applicant is taken secretly—that is, with no brother knowing how another may vote. In most Jurisdictions it is an infraction of Masonic law—in all it is a serious infraction of Masonic ethics—to endeavor to ascertain how another brother will vote, or has voted on an applicant or to disclose how he voted or will vote. The “secrecy of the ballot” and the universal (in this country) requirements that a ballot be unanimous to elect are two of the greatest bulwarks of the Fraternity. Occasionally both the secrecy and the unanimity may seem to work a hardship on a man apparently worthy of being taken by the hand as a brother; but no human institution is perfect, and no human being acts always according to the best that is in him. The occasional failure of the system to work complete justice may be laid to the individuals using it and not to the Fraternity.

“Harmony being the strength and support of all well regulated institutions, especially this of ours.” This phrase, or one similar, is familiar to all Masons. Harmony—oneness of mind, effort, ideas and ideals—is one of the foundations of Freemasonry. Anything which interferes with Harmony by so much hurts the Institution. Therefore it is essential that lodges have a harmonious membership; that no man be admitted to the Masonic home of any brother against his will. For this reason it is required that the names of applicants to a lodge be set before the entire membership, prior to a vote, that all may know that John Smith is to be balloted upon; that any who think him unfit timber for the lodge, or who have personal objections to entering into the sacred relation of brotherhood with him, may have the opportunity to say “No.”

The power thus put in the hands of the individual Master Mason is very great. No officer, not even the Grand Master, may inquire how we vote, or why we voted as we did. No Grand Master has the power to set aside the black cube we cast. If in the ballot box is a black cube, the applicant is rejected. (In many Jurisdictions a single black cube in the ballot box requires the ballot to be taken again, immediately, to avoid the possibility of a mistake. If the black cube reappears the second time, the applicant is rejected.)

This rejection of an application does more than merely prevent the applicant from being given the degrees. It creates over the petitioner a lodge jurisdiction. He may not apply to another lodge for the degrees refused him by this one, without first securing from that lodge a waiver of jurisdiction. He may not again apply even to the lodge which rejected him until after a certain statutory period—usually six months. When his application is again received and brought up for ballot, the fact that he previously applied and was rejected is stated to the lodge. In other words, the casting of a black cube not

only rejects for the degrees, but puts a certain disability upon the applicant which he is powerless to remove.

The brother who casts a ballot, then, upon an applicant, wields a tremendous power. Like most powers, it can be used well or ill. It may work harm, or good, not only upon him upon whom it is used, but to him who uses it. Unlike many great powers put into the hands of men, however, this one is not subject to review or control by any human agency. No king, prince, potentate; no law, custom or regulation; no Masonic brother or officer, can interfere with the individual's use of his power.

For no one knows who uses the black cube. No one knows why one is cast. The individual brother and his God alone know. The very absence of any responsibility to man or authority is one of the reasons why the power should be used with intelligence, and only when, after solemn self-inquiry, the reason behind its use is found to be Masonic.

Any one can think of a hundred reasons why black cubes are cast. Our neighbor applies for the degrees. Outwardly he is an honest man of good character, bearing a good reputation. However, we have heard him quarreling violently with his wife. We are morally sure that he struck her. We can't prove it; the poor woman never said anything about it; she suffered the blow in silence rather than endure the greater agony of publicity. It is not for us to have him arrested as a wife beater if his wife can stand him! But we don't want a coward, a bully in our lodge! Naturally—and most brethren will say properly—we cast the black cube.

Our office associate wants to be a Mason. He applies to our lodge. As far as the investigating committee can ascertain he is a good man, honest, pays his debts, is a church member, a hard worker. But we have heard him repeat, to us and to others, matters which we know were given to him in confidence. We have learned to distrust his discretion. We don't believe that a promise means much to him. It may be, of course, that a Masonic obligation would be kept. But we are not sure. Naturally, we vote against him. Some men otherwise "good and true" are ill-natured, violent tempered, disagreeable. To admit them to our lodge might destroy its harmony of spirit. Others are vain and boastful, self-seeking, apt to bend every agency in which they come in contact to their own ends. We do not believe such a man will be an asset to our lodge. We keep him out.

A certain man IS our personal enemy. The quarrel between us may have nothing to do with right and wrong; it may be the result merely of a life time of antagonism. He applies to our lodge. Our lodge is our Masonic home. We would not want this man in our family home; we do not think we will be happy with him in our Masonic home. It is our privilege to keep him out.

These, and a thousand other good reasons, are all proper ones for the casting of a black cube. If the lodge might suffer, if we might suffer, if we know that our absent brother would suffer from the applicant being elected, we have the best of reasons for seeing that he is rejected. Such use of our power is proper, Masonic, ethical, wise, just.

But there is another side of the shield. Unfortunately, no hard and fast rule can be laid down. There is no way to explain "this is a good reason, but that is not a good

reason” for casting a black cube. Each of us has to judge the reason for himself. Yet some suggestions may be given.

We know a man we dislike. He has different ideas from ours. He belongs to a different “set.” He is not the type we admire. Our dislike does not amount to hatred, nor is it predicated upon any evil in the man’s character. He and we are antipathetic; we rub each other the wrong way. When he applies to our lodge we must decide this question: will the unpleasantness to us, in having him as a member, be greater than the good to him which may come from his reception of the Masonic teachings? Are we sure that we cannot accept him as a brother merely because we “have never liked him?” We all know cases like this; the president of the bank turns down Johnson’s application for a second mortgage. Johnson makes the matter personal. He “has it in” for the president. The president applies for the degrees. Some one casts a black cube. It may, and may not, be Johnson. We don’t know. But perhaps, later, we hear Johnson’s boast “I got even with the son-of-a-gun who turned down my loan !” He doesn’t say how he “got even,” of course. But we are pretty sure we know.

Such a use of the black cube is, of course, utterly un-masonic. It is a misuse of a great power. As well turn down the minister of the Baptist church because he doesn’t agree with our minister, who is a Methodist! As well turn down the automobile dealer because he refused to give us a larger allowance on our old car! Turning the Masonic black cube into a secret dagger for personal revenge is indefensible.

Freemasonry works some curious miracles. A self-made man applied five times for the degrees in a certain lodge. The man was rather ignorant, yet a commercial success. He had, literally, raised himself by his bootstraps from the poverty of the streets to a business position of some prominence. Yet he was rather raw, rough add ready, even uncouth. No shadow of personal unworthiness rested upon him; he was honest, upright, a good citizen. In this lodge a certain Past Master—as was discovered in after years—voted four times against this applicant. The Past Master left the city. On the fifth application the petitioner was elected. Something in Masonry took hold of his heart; through Masonry he was led to acquire some of the education he lacked; through Masonry he was led into the church. In time he made such a reputation for himself as a Mason that he was put in line, and finally achieved the solemn distinction of being made Master of his lodge. He is still regarded as one of the best, most constructive and ablest Masters that lodge has ever had.

In the course of ten or twelve years the absent Past Master returned. In the light of history, he confessed (which strictly speaking he should not have done!) that it was he who had kept this man out for what he really believed were good reasons; he thought the “rough neck” would detract from the dignity and honor of the Fraternity. Yet this same “rough neck,” through Masonry, became educated, a good churchman, a fine Mason and an excellent officer. Had the Past Master whose black cube were cast with honest intention to benefit the Fraternity not left town, the blessings of Masonry might forever have been denied a heart ready to receive them, and society, lodge and church been prevented from having the services of a man who gave largely of himself to all three. The black cube is the great protection of the Fraternity; it permits the brother who does not desire to make public his secret knowledge to use that knowledge for the benefit of the Craft. It gives to all members the right to say who shall not become members of their

lodge family. But at the same time it puts to the test the Masonic heart, and the personal honesty of every brother who deliberates on its use. The black cube is a thorough test of our understanding of the Masonic teaching of the cardinal virtue Justice, which “enables us to render to every man his just due without distinction.” We are taught of justice that “it should be the invariable practice of every Mason, never to deviate from the minutest principles thereof.”

Justice to the lodge requires us to cast the black cube on an applicant we believe to be unfit.

Justice to ourselves requires that we cast the black cube on the application of the man we believe would destroy the harmony of our lodge.

Justice to the applicant—we are taught to render justice to every man, not merely to Masons—requires that no black cube be cast for little reasons, small reasons, mean reasons. And justice to justice requires that we think carefully, deliberate slowly, and act cautiously. No man will know what we do; no eye will see, save that All Seeing Eye which pervades the innermost recesses of our hearts, and will, so we are taught, reward us according to our merits.

Shakespeare said, “O, it is excellent to have a giant’s strength, but it is tyrannous to use it like a giant!”

The black cube is a giant’s strength to protect Freemasonry. Used thoughtlessly, carelessly, without Masonic reason, it crushes not only him at whom it is aimed but him who casts it. A well used black cube goes into the ballot.

Ill used, it drops into the heart and blackens it.