

Lodge Visitation - A Privilege

A parade of misfortunes had culminated by forcing potato planter Fred Jensen to stop his cross-country dash 85 miles short of his destination. From his home in Pocatello, Idaho, across almost 3000 miles of highway, Fred's car had given trouble, and now, at Henniker, N.H., the cooling system finally gave up. Stifling a groan, he edged the large sleek car to the curb in front of Henniker's only garage. The sun was sinking rapidly, as were his chances of acting, for the tenth successive year, as keynoter for the Potato-Growers Association to open in Portland, Maine, the following morning.

"Henniker," Fred mused, "some sign at the edge of town stated that this is the only Henniker in the U.S." Watching the approach of the garage man, Fred opined to himself that it was just as well that it was. He could not help notice the Masonic emblem dangling from the man's watch chain, emerging from the upper pocket of his denim overalls. "Well, at least we have something in common," he thought. "We have both met an obstacle, and both have overcome it. I wonder if that will make any difference in the service I get?"

Three hours later Fred took stock. He knew by name nearly all the business men of Henniker, had had a splendid meal at the lodge hall, had a fine room and bed in the home of our garage man, and the assurance that his mechanic would work all night, if necessary, to have his car in readiness for the final dash to Portland in the morning.

What wizardry lay in all this activity? What transformed this traveler from far away, from a faceless person behind an auto wheel into a man of specific merit, and deserving of the favors of these staid New Englanders? Was he in possession of the proper amulet? Or did the townsfolk mistake him for Marion Brando, traveling incognito?

None of these wrought the change. It was his Masonic membership and the privilege of visitation which was his, is yours, and is mine. The Mason who travels often, particularly the salesman, is no stranger to this privilege. Many depend upon it to relieve the boredom of going from place to place alone, and in time establish firm friendships in the cities visited.

Any Mason in good standing may visit any recognized lodge in the country or abroad, subject at all times to regulations of his own and the visited jurisdiction. The privilege offers itself to the Masonic traveler at the corporate limits of the community, extends an invitation to the sojourning brother, an invitation that fades away only upon his departure from the lodge area. To the Fred Jensens the world over are made available the facilities of lodges, the assistance, companionship, and hospitality of its members, all when he presents himself at the lodge portal. The cold exterior of a strange community, and the aloof manner of its citizens disappear upon his acceptance with the friendly and fraternal handshake.

That less than ten in every hundred Masons in the US avail themselves of the privilege (or ever will) is a regrettable circumstance. Many brethren are unaware of their ability to call upon lodges abroad, or that they may seek assistance in case of emergency away from home.

The word "privilege" has been mentioned frequently. One might ask why visitation is not a right, especially since some by-laws refer to it in this manner. It is a right only insofar as each Mason has the same chance, meets the same requirements, and is greeted as are all other Masons upon visiting another lodge. However, restrictions are placed upon the indiscriminate visitation of lodges in much the same manner as a man may regulate the traffic through his own home. Any member present in lodge at the time a visitor presents himself, may object to the Master, and our traveler must remain outside the tiled door. If already sitting in lodge, he must retire. In Illinois and other jurisdictions the member is not required to give his reason, nor is the Master permitted to demand it, The lodge is the member's fraternal home, so it is for him as well as any other member, to select those from other lodges to sit with him in his own. In some jurisdictions only the Master is clothed with the power of exclusion of visitors. That this right of a member to exclude a visitor is rarely employed is a tribute to the caliber of men in the Masonic fraternity. Rarely is a case of abuse of this right brought to Grand Lodge attention, and many lodges operate for years on end without a Master being required to execute an order of exclusion.

However, there are logical times when objection is made, but the objection is then not of a personal character. The visiting Mason should avoid meetings at which election of officers and lodge audits are discussed, as well as when any topic of a strictly local and unpleasant nature is to be aired. He may not be present at Masonic trials unless he is on official business in connection with such trial. Only upon express invitation of the lodge should any visitor presume to appear for admission under these circumstances. Otherwise he may encounter an embarrassing "impasse" leaving an unpleasant memory of his visit.

Again, there are certain nonmembers of lodges who are not usually classed as visitors so far as exclusion is concerned. These include, in most jurisdictions, the Grand Master, his proxy or accredited representative, the district deputy grand master of the district in which a lodge is located and a candidate of another lodge who is receiving a degree as a courtesy to his lodge. The District Deputy Grand Master is immune from exclusion only while he is on an official visit. In Illinois, however, this can be during any time the lodge is open and may be announced without previous notification; thus it were imprudent to object to his presence, should he be present informally. He would need only to retire and have his office announced with the desire for admission, and the objector would be shorn of his power.

Most of us have none of these titles and are not involved in trials. Many of us do not actually know the procedure of visiting another lodge. The method to gain admission is in most jurisdictions basically the same.

First of all, be certain you have something to identify you, a dues card or letter under seal from your lodge addressed to you, or any document issued under seal by it. Make certain the dues card is countersigned-many brethren have been careless of this in the past. A card may fall into unscrupulous hands, and might be used in an itinerant manner to beg money or other assistance, all in the name of the brother who forgot to sign and then lost his card.

If you are just plain Johnnie Mason, one of the members who never studied the work and seldom attend meetings, it might be well to brush up on the principle grips and passwords with a member of your lodge. Now, fortified with all this, you are about to invade the precincts of the strange lodge. Let us take the procedure step by step, beginning with the outer vestibule.

- (a) You have previously determined that the lodge is regular and recognized by your own Grand Lodge. You approach the Tyler and advise him of your desire to visit, introducing yourself. He will make the necessary arrangements while you remain with him.
- (b) Two or more members of the lodge will appear, from the lodge meeting if in session, introduce themselves, and chat with you a short time. These brethren are entrusted with the task of satisfying themselves that you are a Master Mason in good standing. They may ask you to examine the register in the thought that a brother may be inside who could vouch for you and eliminate the examination.
- (c) You know not a single brother present however, and are requested to exhibit the documentary evidence to which we have referred. The committee will check the directory of lodges to ascertain the regularity of your own, unless they already know of it.
- (d) Having satisfied themselves in that regard, the committee will retire with you to a convenient place from which any and all other persons are excluded while the examination is being conducted. If such a place is not available, all those present and within hearing distance must aver their membership and good standing right along with you, the visitor.
- (e) You and the others hold the Volume of the Sacred Law while swearing to your eligibility to visit, and at the conclusion of this portion of the ceremony the examination proceeds at the discretion and in the judgment of the committee, who may at this point vouch for you without further discussion.
- (f) This avouchment is made to the Tyler, who will cause you to sign the register, to which will be appended the name of the member who is making the avouchment.
- (g) After the committee have reported their findings to the Master, you will be properly clothed and conducted into the lodge by the appropriate officer. Here you will be introduced to the members present and led to a convenient seat next to brethren, if possible, so that you may be made to feel at ease quickly.
- (h) If you are a Grand Lodge officer or hold any title in the fraternity the Master may, at his discretion, have you brought to the East for introduction, and accorded a seat beside him.

Now, suppose one day you find conditions reversed and you are appointed as part of an examining committee. You will act as described above, and will exercise tact and diplomacy in your greeting and the way in which you make the various requests of the visiting brother.

Some suggestions along this line may be timely at this point. When about to give the oath of good standing as a Master Mason, it is advisable to ask the visitor if he wishes to give it first, with you following. Never ask him if he can give it; this is an impertinence. Possibly he cannot, but it is not your province to be the judge. By ascertaining whether the visitor has ever held office or has been commissioned by Grand Lodge, you may decide just to what extent you will examine him. You would not expect a visitor who is only occasionally present in his own lodge to rattle off a long lecture or conduct a degree for you in the examination. Remember to give the visitor, at all times, the benefit of courtesy and friendliness.

Above all, put the visitor at ease. He may never have undergone this ceremony before. If you perceive that he is becoming "out of his depth" in replying to your questions, suggest to him that he relate what transpired in the degrees in his own words. This will often bring out the desired information from a brother who finds himself unable to recite a word of ritual in the proper manner. Always keep in mind that true Masonry lies far beyond the mere ability to recite its ritual and ceremony, or the act of doing lip service to its teachings.

Visitation is, then, a true privilege. We now know that it is such, since one may visit only at the sufferance of all members then present. It is a privilege, however, in a greater sense as it enables a Mason to widen his scope of experience, his acquaintances, his fund of knowledge, and his understanding of the complexities of human nature. We shall sometimes find, as did our Western brother mentioned above, a spiritual life and a renewal of our confidence in mankind's basic honesty and compassion. When we observe men who were complete strangers only a short hour before, greet us ' with a warm and fraternal handshake, we realize that the fraternity is, after all, a collection of Grand Lodges, which in turn are collections of constituent lodges. Again, these lodges are made up of the individual man-in a sense, a procession of "Hennikers" scattered over the face of the earth, but with a common meeting point of the mind and heart. Here are the "grass-roots" of the Craft, and with these qualities the newly raised brother may well plan his Masonic beginnings.

This Short Talk Bulletin has been adapted from a service letter issued by the Grand Lodge of Illinois Committee in Masonic Education several years ago.