

THE VISITING BROTHER

by: Unknown

The Lodge of Antiquity (England) possesses an old Masonic document written during the reign of James II between 1685 and 1688; in it appears the following: “that every Mason receive and cherish strange fellows, when they come over the country, and set the mon work, if they will work, as the manner is; that is to say, if the mason have any mould stone in his place, he shall give him a mould stone, and set him on work; and if he have none, the Mason shall refresh him with money unto the next lodge.”

In the Constitution of the Grand Lodge of England it is set forth that:

“A Brother, who is not a subscribing member to some lodge, shall not be permitted to visit any lodge in the town or place in which he resides, more than once during his secession from the Craft.” (Which declares, by inference, that Masons who are “subscribing members to some lodge” may visit as often as they wish.)

Mackey’s Fourteenth Landmark reads as follows:

“The right of every Masons to visit and sit in every regular Lodge is an unquestionable Landmark of the Order. This is called the ‘right of visitation.’ This right of visitation has always been recognized as an inherent right, which inures to every Masons as he travels through the world. And this is because Lodges are just considered as only divisions for convenience of the universal Masonic Family. This right may, of course, be impaired or forfeited on special occasions by various circumstances; but when admission is refused to a Mason in good standing, who knocks at the door of a lodge as a visitor, it is to be expected that some good and sufficient reason shall be furnished for this violation, of what is in general a Masonic Right, founded on the Landmarks of the Order.”

Where two rights conflict, the lesser must give way to the greater. This is in accord with human instinct, common sense and a proper social attitude.

Thus, it is the right of every tax payer and citizen to walk freely upon the streets of his city; he has a vested interest in what is common to all, for the benefit of all, and paid for by all. But if an emergency arises the police may rope off a street and forbid, temporarily, travel upon it; the immediate right of protection to all, or of expediency for the good of all, is, for the time being greater than the individual right to use the street. In a very large degree the Master is the absolute ruler of his lodge.

He has the unquestioned power to exclude or admit at his pleasure. Visitors come into his lodge when and only when he orders them admitted; he has the power to exclude a member, or even an officer of his lodge.

But this great power is hedged about with restrictions; he is responsible to the Grand Lodge; and, “ad interim,” to the Grand Master, for all of his acts. If he rules arbitrarily, excludes a member or a visitor for an improper reason, or for no reason at all, he can and should be called to account before the supreme Masonic authority.

A Mason in good standing who desires to visit a lodge other than his own makes his wishes known to the Tiler, who communicates with the Master that a would-be visitor desires admission. The Master is not compelled to order a committee to examine the would-be visitor; but, if he does not, so it is generally held, he should have good and sufficient reasons for failure to permit the brother to exercise his right of visitation.

The usual “good and sufficient reason” for refusal to permit a would-be visitor to be examined - or, if vouched for, to enter the Tiled door - is that his presence has been objected to by some member present.

If over ruled by the Master, such an objection might easily destroy the peace and harmony of his lodge. The member who has a personal quarrel with a would-be visitor - no matter how regrettable is such a state of affairs between Masons - has the greater right in the lodge. The member has the right of membership; the right of voting on all questions; the right to take part in and be a part of the deliberations of his lodge. The visitor has only the right of visitation in the lodge; even if obtains entry he cannot vote, propose motions or speak on a question without invitation from the Master.

Having the greater rights in the premises the member of a lodge is to be considered before the would-be visitor; the peace and harmony of the lodge are of more importance than the right of visitation. In spite of the Landmark quoted, and the authority of antiquity, not all Grand Jurisdictions are at one on this subject of the right of visitation. In some Jurisdictions it is held that the lodge, being a little Masonic family of its own, has the right to say who shall and who shall not visit it for any reason or for no reason; that visitation is a courtesy accorded from a host to a guest, not a right possessed by the individual Mason as a small part of a greater whole. With this standpoint the majority of Masonic authorities do not agree but as all Grand Lodges are sovereign unto themselves, Jurisdictions which so rule are right within their own borders. The question of the regularity of the would-be visitor’s lodge is important in some Jurisdictions, in others it is considered as less vital. Where clandestine Masonry flourishes or has flourished Grand Jurisdictions usually insist on being satisfied that the applicant comes from a lodge under the obedience of a recognized Grand Lodge. Where clandestine Masonry is but a name the committee may, and often does depend upon a careful examination than a “List of Regular Lodges” to satisfy itself that the visitor is from a “just and legally constituted lodge.”

Whether a would-be visitor is in good standing is a question easily answered if he possesses a current dues or good standing card. The majority of American Grand Jurisdictions give such a card on payment of dues and demand its presentation to the committee at the time of examination; but there are exceptions.

Some Grand Lodges hold that if a would-be visitor's Tiler's oath that he has been regularly initiated, passed and raised; does not stand suspended or expelled; knows of no reason why he should not visit his brethren is to be believed, his statement under oath that he is in good standing may also be credited!

Masonic authorities are almost universally agreed that the unaffiliated Mason has no right of visitation beyond a single visit to a lodge. The unaffiliated Mason pays nothing towards the upkeep of the Fraternity from whose ministrations he would profit if he were permitted to visit as freely as the affiliated Mason. But it is recognized that many unaffiliated Masons earnestly seek a new Masonic home in the location in which they have come live; therefore, it is conceded that such demitted members of other lodges have a right to visit at least once, to learn something of the lodge to which they may make application for affiliation.

A great and important duty involves upon the examination committee to which is intrusted the task of ascertaining if a would-be visitor is a regular Mason and entitled (under the Master's pleasure) to visit with his brethren. Committee members are, for the time being, Tilers; their examination should be so conducted that in the event the would-be visitor is a cowan, nothing has been said or done which would give him any information. On the other hand brotherly courtesy dictates that it be not necessarily long. That committee of two is well advised to regard the examination as being a ceremony conducted by "Three" brethren to ascertain their mutual brotherhood, rather than an inquisition in which a man must prove himself innocent of the charge of being a cowan.

It is better that ninety-nine culprits escape punishment, than, that one innocent man be punished. Masonically it is better that ninety-nine true brethren unable to satisfy a committee and be turned away, than one cowan be admitted to the lodge. But there is a middle course between asking a Mason who is obviously well instructed and knowledgeable every possible question in all three degrees, and being "satisfied" with the "Tiler's Oath" and just one or two questions. A good committee seeks for the spirit rather than the form. There is no uniformity in ritual through this nation or the world. It is not important that the would-be visitor know the exact words of the ritual of the Jurisdiction in which he would visit; it is important that he know the substance of the work as taught in his own Jurisdiction. If this were not so, no English brother could visit in an American lodge, no American brother could work his way into a Scotch lodge. In all recognized Jurisdictions the world over the essentials are the same; only words and minor details differ. Thus, Aprons are worn "as a Master Mason" indifferent ways in several Jurisdictions in the United States, "but in all Jurisdictions a Master Mason wears an Apron!"

A visitor has the undoubted right (Mackey) to demand to see the Charter or Warrant of the lodge he desires to visit, in order to satisfy himself that it is a "regularly constituted lodge." Admittedly, such a request is a rare as for a committee to discover a cowan attempting to enter a lodge; but the right is generally conceded by Masonic authority, no matter how seldom it is exercised. The visitor to a lodge pays it the highest

compliment he can, short of seeking affiliation. Once admitted his status is that of a brother among brethren, a guest in the home of his host. Alas, too often the visitor is relegated to the benches and left severely alone. Too often a Master is “too busy” with his meeting to attend to his duty as a host and the brethren too interested in their own concerns to pay much attention to the visiting brother. Careless Masonic hospitality is only less serious than carelessness in the committee. A stranger in town visits a lodge with the hope of finding friends, companions and brethren; he desires human contacts, to refresh himself at the Altar of Brotherhood, to mingle with his fellows on a level of exact equality. If he finds them not, he has a right to judge the lodge he visits as lacking in that fine Masonic courtesy than which nothing is more heartening. Happy the lodge with ideals of welcoming the visitor. Fortunate the lodge whose Master makes it his business, either personally or through a committee, to say a brotherly word of welcome, to see that the brother is in friendly hands, and make him feel that although far from his habitat yet he is at home. The fame of such a lodge spreads far!

In many lodges the Secretary writes a letter to the lodge from which a visitor has come, advising them of his visit; a pretty custom and heartening, especially if the brother who has visited finds it in his heart to tell his own lodge of the pleasant time he had, the brotherly treatment he received, perhaps the homesickness cured by the Fraternal kindness with which he was greeted. Generally the visitor gets a greater reward for the time he has spent than the lodge he visits. Masons who visit many lodges, especially if in other than their own Jurisdiction, receive a new idea of the breadth of the Order, a new feeling for the underlying principles of the ancient Craft. If he can express his pleasure in his visit, bring a message from his home lodge to those brethren he visits, they also may gain from the occasion. In any event the lodge visited has been paid a compliment; the visitor has received trust and faith, regardless of the character of the welcome. A Mason who has the opportunity to visit in other lodges may well recall the words of the Great Light upon the Altar, no less true for him that they were said in olden time; “Let us go again and visit our Brethren in every city” (acts 15:36). Brethren of that lodge which has the privilege of acting as host to him who comes to the Tiler’s door a stranger and enters the lodge as a brother may rejoice in the words: “Let Brotherly Love continue. Be not forgetful to entertain strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.” (Hebrews 14:1, 2.)