



MASTERING YOUR LODGE

The essential guide for the Worshipful Master's year in the chair

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FORWARD

The views expressed in this ebook, while applicable to Lodges everywhere, were intended for those operating under the Australian constitutions. Allowances should therefore be made for the effect of other official procedures and rulings on those views. In Australia, for instance, practically all Lodge officers are appointed by the WM, but in some other places they are elected by the Brethren in open Lodge; in Australia too, the charges are invariably given by floor members (i.e. MMs not in office) and seldom by the WM or officers, whereas in other jurisdictions the work may be done by PMs or by the WM.

This ebook also includes a chapter on the duties of an Investigation Committee, the Address to an Initiate at the Festive Board and on the Presentation of a MM's certificate, and lectures than can be presented in open Lodge when ladies and Visitors are present.

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CHAPTER I

THE QUALITIES OF LEADERSHIP

To be a Master of a Craft Lodge is one of the most rewarding experiences a Freemason can enjoy. It does not come to everyone - only one in a hundred Masons can hope to reach the Master's Chair - and it is usually the climax of at least 10 years' devotion and regularity in the work of the Lodge. Nowadays the average MM starts off as a Steward and travels along the line of officers' chairs until he becomes a nominee for the top position. There is never any guarantee that he will become elected but when a man attains the office of W it is a foregone conclusion that only a personal disaster or a departure from the district will stop him from reaching the Chair.

Not all men make suitable Masters. Not all men are born leaders. Not all men can lend a natural grace and distinction to the office. Few can afford to devote the time to attending Lodge regularly; and the numbers who have the ability to absorb many pages of ritual required is limited. Many good men are prevented from rising because their occupations leave them insufficient time or their manifold responsibilities make them disinclined to study, and many mediocre men have ample time and no worries, which enable them to study the ceremonies and attend rehearsals and meetings. Some of the latter are clumsy and hesitant when they become Master, with the result that the Lodge lacks a sense of direction and its work is hampered by fumbling and indecision.

From the wording of the installation ceremony and the charges delivered to him, it is obvious that Freemasons expect a lot from the Master of a Lodge. To accept the office casually and to hope that everything will be all right is simply asking for trouble if it means that an inefficient leader is being unloaded on the Lodge, and the members will experience frustration, causing some to stay away and lose interest.

It may be true to say that Lodges get the Masters they deserve. During the 10 years or so a Brother is working his way up to the top, it should be quite obvious as to the type of man a Lodge is getting. Any faults should be revealed. It is not easy, of course, to dislodge a keen Brother whose only weakness may be that he cannot learn the charges; it may be pressure of work or the type of work, or it may be plain laziness. We may think he will ultimately become efficient by the time he gets to the Chair but by then it is too late if he is a dud. The study of character involved is a very complex one. It is so easy to be wrong. Many a poor speaker has revealed qualities of leadership which have delighted the Brethren and many a supposedly brilliant man has turned out to be a disappointment. On the whole, the system works fairly well but through the years we notice the occasional Master who is inefficient, with the result that the enthusiasm of the officers is affected and a spirit of listlessness prevails throughout the Lodge.

HIGH STANDARDS REQUIRED

A Master-elect has to measure up to very high standards. When he is addressed by the IO he is told that 'once in every year, the Brethren of each Lodge elect an expert Brother to preside over them ... in the Master of a Lodge it is requisite that he be true and trusty, of good character and held in high estimation among his Brethren and fellows. He ought to be of exemplary character, courteous in demeanour, easy of address and steady and firm in principle ... be well skilled in this our noble science and a lover of the Craft.' He is asked if

he can conscientiously accept the office under these terms and requirements and he answers aloud "I can." There is no beating about the bush. He cannot say he didn't know.

In his obligation, he promises to be zealous, faithful and impartial in his duties and to support maintain and uphold, pure and unsullied, the genuine principles and tenets of the Craft. This he recites in language plain enough to be properly understood by anyone.

The WTs, the Pillars and the Address to the Master all emphasise in unmistakable language that his is no task to be lightly entered upon and that the honour, reputation and usefulness of the Lodge will depend upon the skill and ability with which he will manage its concerns. It is his particular province to communicate light and instruction to the Brethren, and thereby prove to the world the happy and beneficial effects of our Order.

This is pretty strong stuff. There is nothing ambiguous about it, yet men will allow themselves to be installed and assume these responsibilities as lightly as they buy a ticket to a theatre.

MAN OF MANY PARTS

A Master requires a three-sided personality. He is the Presiding Officer in his Lodge responsible for the transaction of business, the reception of Visitors and the conduct of ceremonies. When the Lodge has been closed he becomes the Smiling Host ready to meet his Brethren and Visitors in the anteroom and to see them seated at the supper table where he will preside. Finally he is the General Administrator of the Lodge, responsible for its supervision, its business arrangements, its investments, the enquiring into the bona fides of prospective members, the allotment of work, the conduct of rehearsals, the planning of the year's work, relations with other Lodges, visiting absent members and the planning and arrangements of the Lodge's social functions. There may be problems connected with Brethren who get into trouble, though these are happily rare. But there are occasion for the exercise of tact and diplomacy, especially in those unfortunate disputes between Brethren which can occur in the best regulated Lodges, and if a Brother resigns from the Lodge because he has been made unhappy, it is the Master's fault if he has not conducted a strict and impartial investigation into the whole matter and not dodged it because it is distasteful.

The Master therefore has many more responsibilities than sitting in the Chair. He is the architect of the Lodge. He plans work and sees that it is carried out with celerity and precision. He is the Grand Master's representative. He is the person responsible to the Grand Master for everything that happens in his Lodge. To him is personally entrusted the Lodge's warrant. If anything goes wrong he - and only he - is to blame.

THE LIVE WIRE - AND THE DEAD DUCK

The incoming candidate's impression of Freemasonry is influenced by the effect the Lodge meeting has upon him at his initiation. I well remember how my whole feeling about Freemasonry was coloured by the admiration I conceived for the Master who initiated me in 1925 - an event I clearly remember because of his outstanding personality and efficiency. He was not by any means a prominent citizen; he was a farmer and inclined to be "agin the government" in a civic sense, but as Master of the Lodge he was friendly, cheerful, word perfect with ritual but very firm. He stood no nonsense. You knew he was the boss. He planned his work well ahead and the Lodge throve and prospered. It is true he had plenty of candidates and maybe my impressions would have been different if he had struck the conditions I found when I entered on a Master's duties - with no candidates and the 1930 Depression ruining the landscape. At the Festive Board he was a genial host, kept the program running merrily and made everyone feel at home. He installed as his successor a man who,

while equally pleasant and even more competent in a ritual sense, gave me the impression that the Lodge was not so important. There was no urgency, no sparkle. Nothing mattered very much.

We often see this happen - the brilliant man succeeded by the mediocre, and there is not much we can do about it, except for each of us to try to be as like the brilliant man as we can in our humble way. But where the mediocre (and most of us are mediocre) is going to be followed by the plainly inefficient then we must be on our guard to see that loyalty to the man does not result in disloyalty to the Lodge. If we continue to advance a Brother through the chairs while entertaining misgivings about his suitability to fill the last and greatest chair then we are doing the Lodge a disservice. We find ourselves in the position where we have no alternative to electing him as Master. Many Lodges, of course, watch this position and apply pressure on a Master-elect to discard types that they feel do the Lodge no credit; the resulting unpleasantness is only temporary and, like an emetic, does good in the long run. In many cases however, the Master-elect received divided counsel and continues advancing a Brother, relying on the rather weak plea that his successor can correct his error if necessary. Even if it be an appointment to a SW's chair he will probably say the Brethren still have a say when it comes to electing him Master, but by then it is too late - they would rather install him Master than let him down.

It is puzzling how a man knowing full well the intensity of the light that will beat upon him as Master of a Lodge, will accept the position when he does not possess the knowledge or personality for effective control. Surely any earnest Brother should go to some pains to ensure that he at least knows something of a presiding officer's duties, the rules of debate and the etiquette of Freemasonry. Some do, of course; they attend public speaking groups and classes to acquire the ability to speak and apply the rules, but many do not bother. "I guess I'll get by," they say - a phrase which must go down in history as the most infamous of all famous last words. And so we see the whispered consultation in the East, the changes of mind, the command to "be seated" when everybody knows they have to continue standing, the fumbling and indecision, the prompting and general air of frustration that follows a poor exhibition in the Chair.

This is one of the causes of absenteeism. Many businessmen, accustomed to reasonable efficiency in their offices and factories, become impatient at seeing poor exhibitions in the chair of their Lodge. They regard the night as wasted and develop the habit of staying away. Once a new member starts staying away from Lodge he finds it easy to become a chronic absentee. Our meetings must be so interesting that the new member will be as fascinated with Masonry as I was - and want to be there every time.

Members of the Lodge will respond to efficiency, provided it is not harsh. They will work splendidly as a team if intelligently led. The whole Lodge glows with pride if the Master is making a good impression. They feel let down when he falters. If he does so persistently you can see the Lodge wilt. Brethren appointed to learn charges no longer try to excel in them; they only half learn, knowing their mistakes will be forgotten in the larger errors in the Chair. The attendance suffers - no one wants to invite a Visitor to witness poor work. Who likes apologising for the Master's lapses? The candidate is not impressed as he should be; his conception of Freemasonry is effected. He wonders whether the boasted high standard required of new members was operating when these men were admitted.

Now in the case you should think I am too demanding in stressing the requirements of a WM, let me quote two opinions from overseas. Addressing the Annual Communication of the Grand Lodge of Alberta (Canada) the Grand Master (MW Bro D. Little) said:

“If it happens that the Master’s chair is occupied by one who has nothing in particular in mind for the benefit of all concerned, it won’t take those on the side lines long to become aware of the fact. No Master need think he is clever enough to bluff his way through what is intended to be his year of service to the Craft and then at the close of his administration to receive the honours due a consecrated leader. There is no haphazard way of attaining success in Freemasonry, or in any walk of life. The conscientious Master will have plans for the Lodge’s welfare and then work hard to carry them to completion. Unplanned meetings are sure to be failures, with the result that all but the ever-faithful few may resolve to stay away from such meetings.”

At the annual communication of the Grand Lodge of Illinois, which met in Chicago on October 2, 1959, Grand Master Harold R. Kopfman pointed out that if the fraternity was to survive, the best leadership must be utilised. In electing a WM who is not qualified either by his knowledge of the Ritual or Masonic Law, the Lodge was doing a distinct disservice to the fraternity, even though he may have reached that office by having served the required term in the minor offices of the Lodge.