

Masonic Courtesy

Author Unknown

Conventions are the rules which society makes for itself, without the force of law, by which its members live together with the least friction. It is not a sin to eat with one's knife or to keep one's hat on in the house; but these are "Not" good form, or good manners. Masonry has developed its own conventions, by which its members act in Lodge and the Anteroom. Not to proceed according to their dictates is not a Masonic offence; it is merely a lack of Masonic manners.

As you passed through the Third Degree you received instructions in the Ritual and the obligation. You were carefully taught those essential things which a man must know in order to be a Mason. But unless you belong to a most unusual Lodge, or had a most wise Brother for a mentor, it is doubtful if you were told much about these little niceties of Lodge conduct. You are supposed to attend your Lodge and learn by observation. Not all Brethren are observing, however. It is not uncommon to see some brother, old enough in Masonry to know better, crossing the lodge room between the Alter and the East (when lodge is open). He might have observed that his Brethren did not do it; but it is much more difficult to note the absence of an act than to take cognizance of something done.

Brethren do not pass between the Altar and the east in a Lodge that is open. It is a convention and there is no penalty for the infraction. It is a courtesy offered the Master. It is rooted in the theory that, as the Great Lights are necessary to shed their eternal light and wisdom upon the Master to govern the lodge with wisdom, this light should never be interrupted at any time; except, during the processions of an initiation and degree work; even for an instant.

Well informed Brethren do not take a seat in the East without an invitation. All Brethren within a tiled room are equal; and the officers are the servants of the Brethren, and not their superiors. All seats, then, might be considered "Open" to all. But Masonry exacts long services of her officers; Past Masters have worked hard and long for the Lodge they love. The Master recognizes their devotion and their loyalty with a special word of welcome, and an invitation to a "Seat in the East" to any distinguished visitor, or some member the Master wishes especially to honour. If all in the Lodge helped themselves to seats in the East there would be no opportunity for the Master to offer that courtesy.

Brethren who respect the formalities of their Lodge will not enter it undressed; that is, without their apron, or while putting that apron on. The spectacle of a brother walking up to the Altar, tying the strings and adjusting his apron while the Master waits for his salute, is not a pretty one. A man who entered church putting on his collar and tying his necktie could hardly be arrested, but he would surely receive unflattering comment. The strangeness of the new badge of a Mason and unfamiliarity with its meaning cause many to forget that it is as important to a Mason in lodge as clean clothing, properly adjusted is to a man in the street.

The Worshipful Master in the East occupies the most exalted position within the gift of the lodge. A lodge which does not honour its Master, not because of what he himself may be, but on account of the honour given him, is lacking in Masonic courtesy. The position he occupies, not the man, must be given the utmost respect, if the traditions of the Fraternity are to be observed.

It is, therefore, to the Master, not to John Smith who happens to be the Master that you offer a salute when you enter or retire from your lodge, or any lodge. Like any other salute, this may be done courteously and as if you meant it, or perfunctorily as if you did not care. The man who puts one finger to his hat brim when he speaks to a woman on the street compares poorly with his well brought up neighbour who lifts his hat. Taking the hat off is the modern remains of the ancient custom of knights who removed their helmets in the presence of those they felt their friends, and thus, before those they wished to honour by showing that they trusted them. A man removes his hat before a woman to show his respect. Touching the brim is a perfunctory salute. Similarly, the salute to the Master is your renewed pledge of fealty and service, your public recognition before all men, or your obligation. It is performed before the Master and the Altar to show him your veneration for his authority, your respect for all that for which he stands. To offer your salute as if you were in hurry, too lazy to properly make it, or bored with its offering, is to be, Masonically, a boor.

A man in lodge is the servant of his Brethren, if he engages in any lodge activity. Servants stand in the presence of their superiors. Therefore, no Mason sits while speaking, whether he addresses an officer or another brother. This does not refer to conversation on the benches during refreshment, but to discussion on the floor during a business meeting.

During the refreshment the Master relinquishes the gavel to the Junior Warden in the South, which becomes, for the time being, constructively the East. All that has been said about the respect due the Master in the East applies now to the Junior Warden in the South.

It is illegal to enter or leave the room during a ballot; it is discourteous to leave during a speech, or during a degree, except at the several natural periods which end one section and begin another.

Smoking is permitted in some lodge rooms during the business meeting. Alas, there are some which do not interdict it during a degree! You will, or course, be governed here by the custom of your own lodge, although it is to be hoped you will never lend the weight of your opinion toward establishing the custom of smoking during the solemn ceremonies of a degree. Unless, indeed, you would like to smoke in church!

A courteous brother does not refuse a request made in the name of the lodge. There are three duties which devolve upon the membership which are too often "the other fellow's business." Every lodge at some time has a knock upon the door from some visiting brother. This requires the services of two brethren from the lodge in the examination committee. Some one has to do that work. To decline it, on any ground whatever, is discourteous to the Master, to whom you have said, in effect, "I don't want to do my share; let George do it. I just want to sit here and enjoy myself while other fellows do the work."

A degree cannot properly be put on without the services of conductors. When you are assigned such a piece of work, it is not Masonic courtesy to refuse, for the same reasons given above. And if you are selected as a member of the Fellowcraft Team in the Master Mason degree, the only excuse for not accepting is that of physical disability. Like other matters herein spoken of, refusal here is not a Masonic offence. Neither is it a legal offence to drink from a finger bowl, seat yourself at the table before your hostess, or spit on your host's parlour floor! But the convention of good manners is what makes society pleasant, and Masonic good manners make lodge meetings pleasant.

One does not talk in church. God's House is not for social conversation; it is for worship and the learning of the lesson of the day. A good Mason does not talk during the conferring of a degree. The lodge room is then a Temple of the Great Architect of the Universe, with the brethren working therein doing their humble best to make better stones for His spiritual Temple. Good manners as well as reverence dictate silence and attention during the work; officers and degree workers cannot do their best if distracted by conversation, and the irreverence cannot help but be distressing to the candidates.

There is a special lodge courtesy to be observed in all debates to any motion. One speaks to the Master; the Master is the lodge. One does not turn one's back on him to address the lodge without permission from him. One stands to order when addressing the chair; customs differ in various jurisdictions as to the method of salute, but some salute should always be given when addressing the Master. The spectacle of two brethren on their feet at the same time, arguing over a motion, facing each other and ignoring the Master, is not one which any Master should permit. But it is also one which no Master should have to prevent!

Failure to obey the gavel at once is a grave discourtesy.

The Master is all powerful in the lodge. He can put or refuse to put any motion. He can rule any brother out of order on any subject at any time. He can say what he will, and what he will not, permit to be discussed. Brethren who think him unfair, arbitrary, unjust, or acting illegally have redress; the Grand Lodge can be appealed to on any such matter. But, in the lodge, the gavel, the emblem of authority, is supreme. When a brother is rapped down, he "Should" obey at once, without further discussion. It is very bad manners to do otherwise; indeed, it is close to the line between bad manners and a Masonic offence.

Failure to vote on a petition is so common in many jurisdictions that it may be considered stretching the list to include it under a heading of lodge discourtesies. In smaller lodges the Master probably requires the satisfaction of the law which provides that all brethren present vote. In larger ones, where there is much business, and many petitions, he may, and often does, declare the ballot closed after having asked, "Have all Brethren voted?" Even though he knows quite well that some may not have voted. This is not the place to discuss whether the Master is right or wrong in such an action. But the brother who does not vote, because he is too lazy, or too indifferent or for any other reason; is discourteous because he injures the ballot, its secrecy, its importance, and its value. Few brethren would be so thoughtless as to remain seated, or stand by their chairs, when a candidate is brought to light. Yet, indifference to one's part in this solemn ceremony is less bad manners than indifference to the ballot; the former injures only a ceremony; but the latter may injure the lodge, and by that injury, the fraternity!

It is a courtesy to the Master to advise him beforehand that you intend to offer thus and such a motion, or wish to offer thus and such a matter for discussion. You have the right to do it without apprising him in advance, just as he has the right to rule you out of order. But the Master may have plans of his own for that meeting, into which your proposed motion or discourse does not fit in. Therefore, it is a courtesy to him, to ask him privately if you may be recognized for your purpose, and thus save him the disagreeable necessity of seeming arbitrary in a public refusal.

Lodge courtesies, like those of the profane world, are founded wholly in the Golden Rule. They oil the Masonic wheels and enable them to revolve without creaking. They smooth the path of all in the lodge, and prove to all and sundry the truth of the ritualistic explanation of that "More Noble and Glorious Purpose" to which we are taught to put the trowel!

SHORT TALK BULLETIN -Vol.II August, 1924 No.8 Author unknown