

# **Whither Are We Traveling?**

Chapter Three – Asleep at the West Gate

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## Asleep at the West Gate

Question 2: How well are we guarding the West Gate?

Down in Tennessee many years ago I heard one of the old stalwarts express the conviction that unless a Lodge is rejecting at least 20 per cent of its petitioners, it is either very fortunate or very careless. That striking statement has come to my mind many times in recent years. Unquestionably the good Brother had a point.

But 20 per cent, mind you, is one petitioner out of every five. (In Indiana we are rejecting about one petitioner in every twelve). It is not difficult to visualize what would happen if an Indiana Lodge were to reject one petitioner in five. The Grand Lodge office would be besieged with delegations; the Grand Master would be implored to do something to stop the "epidemic" of black-balling.

Of course, the rejection of one petitioner in five might, in the long run, be the best thing that could possibly happen to a Lodge, but we are not interested in taking the long term view. No, we want to get the new Temple paid for.

For years now I have heard the whispered complaint, "We used to be getting petitions for the degrees from the good, substantial leaders in the community. Now we are getting..."

Isn't it about time we stop our whispering and say some things out loud, even if they are unpleasant to hear?

One of the conditions causing dismay in more than one Lodge is the fact that the sons of its highly respected members are not petitioning for the degrees. True, they may be busy getting ahead in the world; they may not have the money; they may not be interested. But that is not all. Why should intelligent young leaders in the community petition a Lodge if they have little or nothing in common with its members? If they cannot find in Freemasonry a social, intellectual and cultural atmosphere that is comfortable, they will find it elsewhere.

We like to repeat the story about Theodore Roosevelt, as President of the United States, attending Lodge when the gardener on his estate was Master. (We don't say how often he went.) But I daresay if the membership of that Lodge had been predominantly gardeners, even the extrovert T.R. might have been a little lax in his attendance!

We can not escape the fact that men judge Freemasonry by what they see walking down the street wearing Masonic emblems. And if what they see does not command their respect, then we need not expect them to seek our fellowship.

Let's face it. Thanks to two wars, inflation, the cost of building and maintaining expensive Temples, and a general lowering of standards, thousands of men have become Masons who should never have passed the ballot. The inevitable result, then, is that the Craft is not looked upon with the same degree of respect it once enjoyed.

How did it all come about?

1. **Economic pressure, for one thing.** A Lodge pays a heavy price for a new Temple so costly to maintain that membership must remain above a certain figure.
2. **We have fallen into careless ways in the investigation of petitioners.** There was the regrettable incident in my own Lodge one time when I served on an investigating committee. The petitioner was widely known; apparently he was worthy; at least nothing to the contrary had reached my ears. Accordingly I turned in a favorable report. The petitioner was elected. Several months later, from another source, the bombshell burst. Not until then did I learn that it was common knowledge about town that the petitioner was far from worthy. To correct the mistake there had to be some embarrassment and some unpleasantness. It has been a sobering thought to reflect that many of my Brethren may have questioned the petitioner's worthiness, but gave him the benefit of the doubt simply because I had made a favorable report!

Whence came the idea that a man – almost any man – has an inherent right to become a Freemason? Is it not a privilege to be conferred upon the worthy?

And whose idea was it that if a petitioner was rejected, a grave injustice has been done the petitioner? Is no one interested in seeing that an injury is not done the Lodge and all Freemasonry by electing one whose worthiness may be in question?

Such an Open Door Policy is not selectivity; it is come-one-come-all. And Freemasonry is a selective organization. It must be if it is to avoid the fate of a score of fraternal groups whose names are well nigh forgotten.

3. **Lodges are not utilizing their most capable members for duty on investigating committees.** In every Lodge there are Brethren of high standards who love the Fraternity and want to see its good name protected; men who would make more than a token investigation; men would really stand guard at the West Gate.

But are such men appointed as members of investigating committees? Not unless they happen to be present at a stated meeting when a petition is received. You have heard it innumerable times: “On this p'tition, I'll 'point Brother Joe Doak, Brother Jim Jones and Brother Bill Brown.” Just like that, the deed is done – the most important assignment ever made in a Lodge is made with no more thought than would be given to who shall turn out the lights. In the hands of Joe Doak, Jim Jones and Bill Brown rests the good name of Freemasonry, even though they may know nothing at all about making an investigation, and care less. But Joe Doak, Jim Jones and Bill Brown were present at a stated meeting – perish the thought that one *not* present be used now and then!

All of us have seen Masters appoint investigating committees literally hundreds of times, but on how many occasions have we seen evidence of careful thought in the selection of personnel for those committees? Men of high caliber and ability are available. Why are we not using them? Is it for fear they might turn in an unfavorable report?

You have heard me say it before and you shall hear me say it as long as I have a voice and a pen: in Freemasonry, there simply is no substitute for quality. We are accepting too many petitioners who can pay the fee and little else; too many men who have no conception of what Freemasonry is or what it seeks to do, and who care not one whit about increasing their moral stature; too many men who look upon Ancient Craft Masonry with contempt – who are interested in using it only as a springboard from which to gain a prestige symbol.

And we had better start applying the brakes while there is yet time.