

Whither Are We Traveling?

Chapter Ten – Bring The Line Up to the Standard

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Bring the Line Up to the Standard

Question 9: Hasn't the so-called Century of the Common Man contributed to making our Fraternity a little too common?

An old legend which comes to us from the Napoleonic Wars tells of a youth, too young to fight, who was permitted to carry the regimental banner. During one bitter engagement his unit was advancing on the enemy under heavy fire. In his youthful zeal the boy went so far ahead of the regiment that he was almost out of contact. The commanding officer send a runner bearing the message, "Bring the standard back to the line."

With heroic recklessness the lad sent back the ringing reply, "Bring the line up to the standard."

In the United States today, politicians like to refer to the present age as the "Century of the Common Man." Even though no man considers himself common and every man desires mightily that his sons be uncommon men, it does make a good vote-catching phrase.

Trouble is, in our solicitous concern for the Common Man, we overlook an important principle of applied psychology. Too much emphasis on common men and common things can serve to make common that which should be uncommon. There is in evidence today what might be called for lack of a better term a Masonic Gresham's Law. Under its operations we are not thrilled with the sight of the line being brought up to the standard; instead, we witness the sad spectacle of the standard being dragged back to the line.

Whether we like it or not, let's face it. The trend is in the direction of altering the pattern to fit the cloth. It has left its mark on every Lodge in Indiana, large and small.

In bringing the subject out into the open, I am not merely unburdening myself of a personal irritation – I am only putting into print what has been whispered in my ear on countless occasions these last 15 years.

When we cease to set a lofty mark and expect our Brethren to measure up to it, when we permit a downward adjustment to conform to practices and manners that are casual and lax and crude, we are dealing our beloved Fraternity a double blow:

First, a blow from without. Certainly we must not expect to retain the prestige the Craft has enjoyed in the past if we can lift our sights no higher than the bowling lanes, the drive-in hamburger stand, the picnic grounds.

Second, a blow from within. Will not men respect and venerate Freemasonry more if they know there are certain rules of gentility – of behavior, of dress, of speech and decorum – which they are expected to observe?

What am I talking about? All right, then, let's spell it out:

1. **The appearance and actions of Master Masons in public ceremonies.** Not always do they create a favorable impression. Only on rare occasions may Freemasons perform their ritualistic work outside the Lodge hall, usually a funeral or the laying of a cornerstone. It requires no great degree of imagination to see what damage can be done the entire Fraternity when men do not possess that priceless gift known as “a sense of the fitness of things.”

One time I attended the funeral rites for a beloved Brother. At the conclusion of the church service the Brethren filed down the center aisle in view of all in attendance to take their places in the escort. The bearer of the Three Great Lights did not know what to do with his head gear. So, down the aisle went the procession with a faded straw hat on top of the Holy Bible, Square and Compass.

What am I talking about? Aprons that are crumpled and soiled. Whether worn without the Lodge room or within, the apron itself is disgraced when it is anything less than spotless, and the Fraternity is cheapened, to say nothing of the psychological effect upon the wearer himself.

Yes, and I am talking about the ridiculous spectacle of the Master Mason who appears anywhere with long apron strings dangling from the rear, all too suggestive of the limp tail of an old white cow I used to know. Must we go out of our way to make ourselves a laughing stock?

2. **Then there are the coarse and boorish performances by self-appointed comedians, and by the Glue Factory Craft Club, in conferring the Master Mason degree.** I have seen the Sublime Degree lose all its sublimity in a matter of seconds when immature men forfeited their opportunity to convey a never-to-be-forgotten lesson and chose instead to show off like little boys. On my private black list are the names of Lodge in which I simply not be present when the Master Mason degree is conferred. Some of them, I am sorry to say, are in Indiana. Twenty-four years ago Carl H. Claudy was saying the same thing in a Short Talk Bulletin which the Master of every Lodge would do well to obtain and read again and again.
3. **Finally, let's lay it on the line. I am talking about the lack of respect shown by the Masons for their Lodge as reflected in the attire they wear to its meetings.** It was Past Master's Night. An invited guest, I sat on the sidelines to witness the always pleasant conferring of the Sublime Degree by those veterans who had borne the heat and burden of the day.

At first all went well. The ritual that only Past Masters know was executed as only Past Masters can. Then King Solomon approached the East. The man who represented that wise and noble ruler wore a slouch felt hat a half-size to large that caused his ears to droop forward. Coatless, his loud pattered sport shirt was buttoned at the throat without benefit of a necktie. Taking his place in the oriental chair, he laid the heel of a yellow right shoe on his left knee, and began chewing his gum thoughtfully.

“Even Solomon in all his glory,” I mused to myself, “was not arrayed like one of these.”

Yes, I know the subject of a man’s personal appearance is a touchy one. Nevertheless, I stoutly maintain that appropriate dress for Masons while attending meetings of their Lodge simply is not a debatable issue. A Lodge hall is dedicated in the name of Jehovah. It is set apart as a place in which the Great Architect of the Universe is an object of our reverence. Why, then, should there be any question about proper and respectful attire in the Lodge room any more than the Church?

Recently a distinguished officer of the Grand Lodge of California prepared a most effective pamphlet under the title, *If Freemasonry Is Good, Let Us Talk About It*. This one paragraph deserves frequent repetition: “The Mason who creates a bad impression, in whatever field of activity, can bring discredit to the Craft. I am in the women’s clothing business, and in our business we are concerned about what our female employees wear ‘off the job’ as well as on. Our salesgirls make an impression at all times – and we want it to be a good impression.”

Let us not cloud the issue with pious mouthings about how Masonry regards no man for his worldly wealth and honors; that it is the internal and not the external qualifications of a man that render him worthy to be a Mason. The question is not one of honors – it is of respect for the dignity of our ancient Craft. Mark it down: *If the internal qualifications are there some of those qualifications will show through on the outer side*. A Mason need not wear a Hart, Schaffner & Marx suit to show proper respect for his Lodge, but certainly there should be a high point below which even laziness and negligence will not permit him to descend.

Sometimes I wonder what a serious minded young Mason must think when he looks about the Lodge room and sees his Brethren attired as they would for an outdoor steak fry. Does his mind go back to the time when he received his preliminary instructions prior to initiation as an Entered Apprentice? Perhaps he recalls two significant sentences: “Put on your freshest and most immaculate garments,” he was told, “that their spotless cleanliness may be symbolic of the faultless purity of your intentions. With your body clean and your garments spotless you are more suitably prepared to receive that spotless and faultless philosophy which Masonry will offer you.”

Yes, perhaps the young Mason *does* remember those sentences. He may be one of the sizable army of newly raised Brethren that drift away from their Lodges never to return!

All these practices and many more serve to cheapen Freemasonry in the eyes of the public and in the eyes of the Brethren themselves.

Much more could and should be said. For example, my criticism has been confined to the Symbolic Lodge. But the Symbolic Lodge does not stand alone in the cheapening process, by any means. Organizations which restrict their membership to Masons and which profit by their relationship to the Craft are doing their part rather well in dragging the standard back to the line.

Now let there be no defensive bleating that the Grand Secretary has gone over to the silk stocking crowd and is promoting tea parties. The choice is not bowling league attire versus white tie and tails. I only insist that Masons, of all persons, should have that fine "sense of the fitness of things;" a wholesome respect for the Lodge and the place it should occupy in the lives of men; the same kind of respect a man should show his church when he goes to worship, or the family of a friend when he attends a wedding, or his host when he is invited to Thanksgiving dinner. Just plain good taste, that's all.

Will the Brethren complain if Lodges insist on dignity, decorum, respect? Will interest lag, attendance fall, membership decline?

Well, take a look at interest and attendance and membership *now*.

When good men are summoned to the highest and best within them, they usually respond with the highest and best. We might be pleasantly surprised at the reaction of our Brethren if challenged to bring the line up to the standard where it belongs!