

The Past Master

Unknown

Fortunate the lodge which has many; poor that body of Masonry in which Past Masters have lost the interest with which they once presided in the East!

The honorable station of Past Master is usually honored by the brethren; generally it is considered as second in importance only to that of the presiding Master. And he is a wise and good Master who sees to it that the brethren of his lodge understand that “Past Master” is no empty title, but carries with it certain rights and privileges, certain duties and responsibilities, all set forth in the general body of Masonic Law, although differing in some respects in different Jurisdictions; certain unwritten attributes which become more or less important according to the character and abilities of the individual Past Master.

It has been well settled in this country, as it is in England, that a Past Master has no inherent, inviolable right of membership in the Grand Lodge, such as is possessed by the Master of a lodge. But in many American Jurisdictions, by action of the Grand Lodge, Past Masters are members of the Grand Lodge (in Nevada, all Master Masons are members of the Grand Lodge, but only the three principal officers and one among all the Past Masters of a particular lodge are considered voting members of Grand Lodge). In some Jurisdictions they are full voting members; in others they have but a fraction of a vote, all the Past Masters of a lodge having one vote between them on any Grand Lodge question to be decided by a vote by lodges. Whether full voting members of Grand Lodge, or members with but a fraction of a votes, they are such by action of their own Grand Lodge, and not by inherent right.

Before the formation of the Mother Grand Lodge in England in 1717, when General Assemblies of Masons were held, Past Masters were as much a part of that body as the members of the Craft. But the Old Constitutions of the Mother Grand Lodge did not recognize Past Masters as members of the Grand Lodge. Dermott’s “Ahiman Rezon” of 1778, quoting Anderson’s edition of the “Old and New Regulations” says: “Past Masters of Warranted Lodges on record are allowed this privilege (membership in Grand Lodge) while they continue to be members of any regular lodge.” But his previous edition of this same work does not contain this statement, and Preston refers to the Grand Lodge, at the laying of the corner stone of Covent Garden Theater, in London, by the Prince of Wales as Grand Master, in these words: “The Grand Lodge was

opened by Charles March, Esq., attended by the Masters and Wardens of all the regular lodges;” he does not mention Past Masters as a part of the Grand Lodge.

These Past Masters, or course, have long since gone the way of all flesh; Past Masters who are now members of Grand Lodges are made so by the action of those Grand Lodges, and not by any inherent right. But the very fact that a Past Master “May” receive such recognition at the hands of his Grand Lodge, which ordinarily would not be given to brethren not Past Masters (except Wardens), must be considered as one of the rights and privileges of a Past Master.

Past Masters are said by Mackey to possess the right to preside over their lodges, in the absence of the Master, and on the invitation of the Senior Warden, or in his absence, the Junior Warden.

According to the ancient laws of Masonry, which gives a Master very large powers, any Master Mason may be called to the Chair by a Master. Here the question is as to who may be called to the Chair by a warden, who has congregated the lodge in the absence of the Master. The great Masonic jurist gives unqualified endorsement to the idea that then only a Warden, or Past Master with the consent of the presiding Warden can preside over a lodge, and counts this as among the rights of a Past Master. However true this may be in this specific case, the practice and the law in many Jurisdictions gives to the Master the right to put any brother in the Chair for the time being, remaining, of course, responsible for the acts of his temporary appointee, and for the acts of his lodge during such incumbency.

It may be considered a moot question as to just when a Master becomes a Past Master. He is installed as Master “until your successor be regularly elected and installed.” From this point of view the Master is Master until his successor has been made Master by installation; in other words, the right to install his successor is inherent in the office of Master, and not Past Master. Under the law of Masonry, however, for this purpose Masters and Past Masters are identical; the Master really becomes a Past Master when, after election he “passes the Chair” in an emergent Lodge of Past Masters, or when, as a virtual Past Master, made so in a Chapter, he is elected Master of his lodge. In those few American Jurisdictions in which the elected Master is not required to receive the Past Master’s Degree, prior to installation, a Master does not become a Past Master until his successor is installed.

The right to install his successor is inherent; the privilege of delegating that duty to another is within the power of any Worshipful Master (Courtesy would indicate that the desires of the Senior Warden be considered for installing officer, as well as the date for the installation). He should not delegate the installing power to any brother who has not himself been installed, in order that the succession of the Oriental Chair be unbroken, from regularly installed Master to Master-Elect, regularly to be installed. Therefore, in most Jurisdictions, the installation power which is the right of the Master, may be considered also a privilege of Past Masters.

A very important right of all Past Masters is that of being elected to the office of Master, without again serving as Warden. Perhaps no regulation is more jealously guarded by Grand

Lodges than this, which dates in print from 1722 (Old Charges), that no Mason may be elected, or installed as Master who has not been regularly elected, installed and served as Warden. There are exceptions; when a new lodge is constituted, a brother who has not been regularly elected, installed and served as a Warden may be elected and installed as Master (In Nevada it is permissible for any Master Mason to be elected and installed as Worshipful Master); when no Wardens in a lodge will accept election to the East, a brother may be elected from the floor, provided a dispensation is secured from the Grand Master. A Past Master may be elected Master of a lodge (whether the lodge over which he once presided or another is immaterial) without dispensation.

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