

CORRESPONDENCE.

WASHINGTON LETTER.

Washington, D. C., Jan. 7th, 1898.—Having taken the required Civil Service examination, the candidate for a clerkship goes home and impatiently awaits developments. He will probably have to await several months—possibly years, and perhaps will never receive an appointment. The commission has a list of "eligibles" for each state, and selections are made therefrom, with due regard to the proper apportionment of places among the states and territories. If our candidate has passed the examination at a high average, his name, like Abou Ben Adam's, leads all the rest; or if it comes within two or three of the top, it is likely to be first on the list before the end of the year. When a vacancy occurs in any department, or extra labor requires another "hand," the head thereof makes request of the civil service commission for a certification to fill a clerkship. It is almost sure to come within class D, calling for a salary of \$900 per annum, or class E, at \$1,000 a year; for now-days outside appointments are rarely made to clerical positions higher in salary, one of the tenets of civil service being that the best places be filled by deserving clerks from the lower grades, and that newcomers must start from the bottom of the ladder; while the places below \$900, averaging from \$30 to \$60 per month, are classed as laborers and do not come within the scope of civil service. The commission selects three candidates from the top of the list and sends the names, status and examination papers of each of the officers who have made the request. The latter looks over these papers, perhaps calling to his assistance the subordinate official who is to make more direct use of the new clerk, and together they decide which of the candidates shall receive appointment. Or if, as occasion happens—neither of the three are up to the standard in view, or if for any other reason they are not satisfactory, the papers are returned to the commission with a request for further certifications. The appointing officer may have in view for the vacancy some friend of his, or an applicant who has been urged upon him by persons of influence; but his personal wishes in the matter are not supposed to conflict with the spirit of the civil service law. Whether they ever do have any weight in the case, is not for me to say.

When the name is finally chosen, the appointment clerk is called in and directed to take the matter in hand. He prepares a formal order for signature by the appointing officer; and then a letter is sent to the appointee, which reads about like this:

Treasury Department,
Office of the Appointment Clerk,
Washington, D. C., Jan. 7, 1898.

Sir—The secretary of the treasury has this day made an order appointing you a clerk of class E in the office of the first assistant secretary of the treasury. Please report at this office at your earliest convenience to take the required oath. Your compensation will be at the rate of one thousand dollars (\$1,000) per annum.

Very respectfully,
JOHN SMITH, Appointment Clerk.

The fortunate individual who receives this missive generally considers it about the pleasantest bit of news he has ever read, and he hies himself post haste to Washington to "help run the government," the envy of his friends at home. On his appearance at the department, the first thing is to be "sworn in," for even the char-woman who clean

up the rooms every night, each for \$400 a year, are required to make solemn oath that they have never borne arms against the government, (how the army of ex-confederates who are now in, managed to get around that clause, I do not know)—that they will perform their duties faithfully and be diligent in the guardianship of Uncle Samuel's interest, "s'help them," etc. And then, at last, oh, glorious moment! our candidate is entered on the pay-roll and assigned to duty, and is at once a full fledged "department clerk." Whether, after all, he is so very fortunate in having obtained the coveted position, is an open question. He may be dismissed next month, or next year; and if he remains long enough he will surely degenerate into a sort of human machine, good for nothing at any other employment.

Certainly he cannot expect to stay forever; and when he does find himself among the "outs," he is generally much worse off, mentally, spiritually, physically and in pocket than when he went in. While he has been dressed every day in metaphorical purple and fine linen, in the small round of a gilded treadmill, the rough-and-tumble world of business has gone on and left him entirely out of the reckoning. His department habits have become second nature and entirely unfitted him for the outside scramble, and unless he is a rara avis indeed he has not saved a cent of his salary, for a thousand dollars in Washington is hardly equal to five hundred anywhere else in America. The national capital is full of ex-department clerks, whose sole aim in life is to get back again, like the moth that flutters around the blaze that singed its wings—like the discharged convict, who after long years in prison is frightened at the big world outside and clamors at the gates to be taken back into the safest place he knows. Such sad cases as are continually coming under one's observation! I know a man who came here a few years ago from a comfortable home in one of the Middle states, to accept a government position at a salary of eighteen hundred a year. He is a lawyer by profession, and had a fine law and miscellaneous library. He lost his position and went into the practice of law in Washington—a branch of business which is more overcrowded here than anywhere else on earth. For weary months he expected the client that never came and literally lived on hope. Then he began to sell his splendid library, the pride of his heart, book by book. The other day he parted with the last of it, for ten dollars. He has nothing else to sell, and a family to support. The grave question is, what will he do now? Like all the rest who have drunk of the leathern waters of Washington, wild horses couldn't draw him away from here; and if they did, where could he go and how begin life anew, with no money and the aforesaid spoiled and expensive family?

I know another man who is yet among the "ins," but lives in daily fear and dread of being dismissed, because of failure from ill health to perform his duties satisfactorily. He has consumption, and three small children, and nothing in the world but his salary of \$900 a year. He knows himself to be dying by inches, and is hourly menaced by the probability of being thrown upon charity for the maintenance of himself and little ones before kind death, the greatest benefactor of the human race, grants him oblivion.

It is "against the rule" for department people to get into debt; but they sometimes do. Just like other people. Last week a friend of mine in the 6th

auditor's office had the privilege of parting with 96 cents—half of all his available assets at the time—to relieve the actual hunger of a fellow clerk, who was dismissed a month ago, because an unrelenting creditor complained to the chief. Dismissals generally come hardest on the female clerks, who, with the charming inconsistency of women, will seldom have a penny ahead, so long as fashions change and there are candy shops on the avenue. This is not true of all of them, however, for many are widows with families to maintain, some are supporting their aged parents, and others are educating younger brothers and sisters. I know a beautiful woman who was the adored wife of a wealthy husband a few years ago. Through the failure of a Philadelphia manufacturer he lost his property, and soon afterwards died. Influential friends secured the widow a place in the U. S. treasury. All went comparatively well for a time; but as there were several children to be clothed, fed and educated, nothing could be saved out of the salary of \$1,000 a year. Some months ago she lost her place, as all do sooner or later. Last Saturday she told me that she had \$3 in money, that she had sold everything in the house that could be turned into money or bread, and that cupboard and coal-bin were nearly empty, and another month's rent almost due. She is hoping through political influence to get back into the department, but if she does not succeed, and quickly, what then? Some time ago the local papers told of two young girls, orphans, from somewhere "out West," who were literally frightened to death because they lost their positions in the patent office and had no hope of securing them again. What could they do but suicide? Their small savings kept them only a few days, and then boarding-house-mistresses grew importunate for money due. They could see no alternative but death, and another, which is as overcrowded as any branch of business in Washington. So they battened up the windows and turned on the gas and left this weary world—for a better one, we hope.

But why multiply cases? The departments are not orphan asylums or charitable institutions, and those who are believed to have power in securing reinstatements and appointments are so harassed by written statements of pitiful cases and desperate straits that in very self-defense they are compelled to pass them over unread. Of course this is only one side of the question. More than ten thousand men and women are tranquilly pursuing the even tenor of their way in the various departments in Washington, drawing good salaries; and if dark visaged Tragedy is dogging their footsteps, it will reveal itself only when the day of dismissal comes. Meanwhile the Civil Service commission sits aloft in judgment, serene and cold, unmoved by individual appeals. It's workings, though perhaps not the best thing for the political health of the country, are certainly most fair for the army of applicants, as a whole. During the years of its existence the commission has examined 150,000 applicants for places in all branches of the public service. Of these, 56,300 failed to pass. Of the 93,700 who did successfully pass the examinations, only about 36 per cent have received appointments. But the number of those appointed was barely 22 per cent of those examined; so only about one-fifth of those who sought places in the public service obtained them. Naturally, the whole business is unpopular among the politicians, who try to break over its rules. It is asserted by many that the civil service plan was shrewdly manipulated by President Cleveland for the sole purpose of keeping his friends in office after he went out of it. They say that