

CORRESPONDENCE.

WASHINGTON LETTER.

Washington, D. C., Dec. 31st, 1897.—I receive a great many letters asking, "How must one go to work to secure a department place in Washington?" All over the country are young men and women—on the farms and in the villages, in stores and work-shops and factories—who believe they could find ease and affluence in a government clerkship, on a salary of \$900 or \$1,000 a year. Young ladies of good parentage, with comfortable homes and every reasonable want supplied, dream of dazzling scenes in which they long to take part; and young fellows just out of college—hampered by narrow environments, long hours of labor and small wages—think they could study law or medicine in one of the excellent night schools of the national capital, paying their way handsomely meanwhile along a sort of royal road to learning and subsequent fame. All leave two important facts out of the reckoning—viz, that \$5 in the country goes further and means more than \$10 in this most expensive city; that it is easier for the typical camel to go through the needle's eye than to fulfill the requirements of the civil service law, and that less than one-fourth of those who successfully pass its examination receive appointments after all their trouble.

Reformers in press and pulpit can hardly find a better field than to preach against the vanity and vexation of place-hunting. True, it is an old theme—but so is every other vice to which poor human nature is addicted. That funny play of Hoyt's, "A Texas Steer," which is responsible for so much laughter, is an excellent sermon on this subject, and "points a moral" by setting forth accurately some of the doings in Washington. His negro character, who came, hot-foot, to the capital, after the mission to Dahomey, as a reward for his political services, and finally jumped at the job of cleaning spittoons, finds many parallels among the army of office-seekers. What chance have the young people aforesaid besides the legion of party workers, each with a "pull?" The latter come here with blooming confidence and began to live in lavish manner the bright life of the capital, in anticipation of the fat salaries that are soon to be theirs; and ninety-nine out of a hundred of them, after months of weary waiting, are like the man of whom everybody has heard—who appealed to President Jackson for a foreign mission and was glad to accept a suit of cast-off clothes. By far the greater number get nothing at all; and hundreds, after hope and money are gone, have to be sent home at somebody's else expense, decidedly wiser—and poorer—than they came. The much maligned civil service dodge, with its bug-bear of competitive examination has greatly reduced the ranks of these—but heaven knows they are far too many. Washington is always crowded with ex-Congressmen, ex-judges, ex-governors, ex-ministers, "exes" of every description, who throng the hotels and infest the Capitol rotunda, and make life a burden for everybody in power by their importunities for government places. And what a heart-breaking struggle, they have to keep up appearances, and to what extremities many of them are reduced for daily bread. Every day they grow seedier and hungrier, holding on by the eyelids, so to say—until finally they drop off into oblivion, by suicide or some other way.

Young men, go West if you will, go hunt for gold amid the snows of

Alaska, or court death from Spanish bullets in Cuba, or as war correspondent in China—go to the meanest place on the face of the earth if you want to; but stay away from Washington, if you value peace of mind and desire comfort in your advancing years. And as for the young woman, she would much better be a respectable servant in body's kitchen than to join the unestimable crowd of applicants in Uncle Samuel's great National Employment Agency.

Having thus eased my conscience of its little sermon, I will proceed to answer the question which heads this letter. Wanting a government position of any sort, you address a letter to the Civil Service Commission at Washington, asking for information; and promptly the mails bring you a concise, comprehensive little pamphlet, devoted to the instruction of the applicants, giving sample questions in the examinations for the departmental, railway-mail and Indian services, and containing a schedule of all the examinations to be held in the different cities during that year. With this book is inclosed a blank "examination slip," on which to write the date and place of examination you may select from the schedule, and the kind of examination you wish to take. When you have filled out this slip, it is in the nature of a brief of your case. There is also a blank application, the size of a sheet of legal cap, two pages, filled with questions for you to answer, as to your name, citizenship, legal residence, education, family, physical qualifications, etc., all of which must be acknowledged before a notary. Two other pages containing blank vouchers which must be filled out by residents of your state, who have enjoyed your acquaintance for at least one year, and are willing to swear to your good character and habits. Four such vouchers are required. When these blanks are returned to the commission, if they are all properly filled, a card is sent to you, which is a notification to appear at the examination you have selected, and will also serve as a ticket of admission to the examination room. For the average applicant there now follows a period of intense preparation. Arithmetics and grammars are consulted, history looked over, and geography studied. True, in the majority of clerkships no great mental ability is required; but surely the conduct of government business and the making of public records and the counting of Uncle Sam's cash and coupons demand at least these rudiments of education. Finally the fateful day arrives—a day of trepidation and of surprises. The examinations appear to have been constructed for the express purpose of How Not To Do It, and the wildest questions are asked, apparently widest of the mark intended. Not long ago a girl who was being examined for a \$60-a-month place in the pension bureau, was asked the distance between Mars and the earth. She hadn't the remotest idea, so she wrote down that she was sure it was so far away that it would not interfere with her work; and let us hope that the sensible answer did not cost her the coveted position. Most people have an idea that civil service examinations in all grades call exclusively for book-learning. As a matter of fact, many men who can neither read nor write have lately passed and obtained positions. The other day one was appointed as a driver, another as a calker, another a blacksmith, each of whom made an X mark for his signature. That reminds me of a bright newspaper man, since

distinguished and successful, who was for years carried on the pay-roll of the Senate as a horse-shoer, although he never shod a horse in his life and perhaps never saw the inside of a smithy. One of the strangest requirements now included in the civil service examination is that the applicant must be able to pass through the elliptical opening 9 by 15 inches in dimensions. Although such a test looks positively silly, it is in some cases of great importance. It is applied to all applicants for positions in the steamboat inspection service. Inspectors of boilers, for example, must pass every day through many such openings in order to attend to their duties; and what an awkward predicament for a portly, bay-windowed gentleman to get himself tangled inside of a boiler! The history of a man's industrial life must be learned before he is eligible to a government position which demands qualifications. Skill in the line of work required, care and rapidity, are more to the purpose in his case than mere book-learning.

Generally speaking, the percentage of college graduates who have tried for high positions under the classified service and who have succeeded through these examinations, is much lower than that of men who have never attended college. Experience is now the principal requirement for many of the higher offices. For instance, the man who will fill the vacant position of assistant attorney general for the interior department, must have practiced at least five years before courts engaged in the adjudication of land laws, because his principal duties will be to pass opinions upon and argue land cases. Applicants for railway mail clerkship must be experts in deciphering indistinct chirography. Those desiring positions in the life-saving service must prove that they have been accustomed to handling small craft in salt water; and so on, through all the ramifications of the government service. Applicants for the scientific places are not many, and it often happens that the commission has hard work to fill a vacancy. This is because the government pays so little to scientific specialists that they can earn more money outside. Some of the examination papers, require a knowledge of languages; others include mechanical engineering, chart work, photography, anatomy, designing and engraving, pomology, climatology, horticulture, astronomy, architecture, engraving and drawing, and goodness knows what else. Last year only twenty-eight men and five women were appointed typewriters and stenographers, although there were seven hundred and eighty-two applicants on the eligible list.

The law also establishes certain age limitations in civil service appointments. Pages in the department must be between the ages of fourteen and eighteen years at the time of their appointment; printer's assistants, from eighteen to thirty-five; messengers, over eighteen; clerks, over twenty. In the railway mail service the appointees must be between eighteen and thirty-five; in the Indian service the ages range between twenty and fifty-five. The appointee must also be a citizen of the United States, physically qualified for service, and not a habitual user of intoxicants. These are by no means all the conditions upon which appointments hinge. They must be apportioned among the states and territories, and the District of Columbia, according to population. Among the numerous exceptions to the revised rules are several which present a peg upon which to hang a hope. One, in high favor with the forlorn regiment of ex-clerks, reads as follows: "Any person who has served in the military or naval service of the U. S. in the late war of the rebellion and was honorably discharged therefrom, or the widow of any such