

AN A CLERK FORGE AHEAD

Countless Difficulties and Much Red Tape Obstruct the Way

UNDER the title of "In the Service of Uncle Sam," H. C. Gauss has contributed an entertaining article to the December number of the National Magazine, in which he describes the Government employe as he really is. Mr. Gauss was for a number of years an employe in the Navy Department, but is now private secretary to Attorney General Bonaparte. Consequently, he is eminently qualified to write upon the subject.

In this article the life of a Government clerk, in Washington particularly, is pictured in all its reality. There is no attempt to envelop it in a roseate cloak, nor is there an effort to make it appear more irksome. The clerk's entrance into civil service, struggle for promotions, mode of living, and ultimate finish, as described by Mr. Gauss, is highly instructive. It follows verbatim:

A GOVERNMENT telegram was handed to him in the country lawyer's office, where he was working for \$10 a week. It offered him a clerkship in a department in Washington at \$600 a year, \$75 a month, \$18.75 a week. He figured it down to his accustomed weekly basis rapidly, and called the result munificent.

Months before he had taken a civil service examination. Because the names who were above him on the list had been exhausted, because some other State's quota had been filled, or because of one or several chances which might or might not be expected to develop favorably, his turn had come, and his name was one of three certified to the appointment clerk in the department in which the vacancy existed.

The appointment clerk, with another

gleaned to doubt the possibilities of short-hand. He put business forms into official letters and addressed a high and mighty official as "Dear Sir." They corrected him patiently, and other clerks told him things. In a week he found that it was just a new and easily learned language, a sort of official slang, and he began to look about him.

Got There Too Early.

First he found that there was no particular sense in getting up early in the morning. He made his appearance at 8 o'clock, and the scrub woman stared at him. At 8:30 the messengers came in and asked him if he had been there all night. It was a long hour until 9, and he ascertained definitely that if he were on hand to put his initials on the time

tributed. After that there was a crescendo movement of industry, broken by the half-hour lunch period, until the moment of a ceremony known as "calling the mail." This occurred after the longer lunch period of the superior officers, at between 2 and 3 o'clock. Industry then began to flag, so that there was no reason why he should not have his hat and coat on and be off promptly at 4:30 o'clock.

Taking Dictation.

His work consisted largely in taking dictation from a clerk who wrote many letters stating definitely, and sometimes curtly, that things could not be done. The things that could



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be done were treated with slips of paper as long as the width of a sheet of letter paper and as wide as one-third of its length. He found that most of these divided into classes, each with a crystallized form of expression, for which he came to have an abbreviated stenographic formula which made dictation and transcribing easy. These slips were called endorsements, and certain details of correspondence came round at intervals encrusted with them, until they looked like ships that had been long at sea. To dictate the various formulas which belonged to the different classes was called "original work." Occasionally the clerk, who did the original work would have an opportunity to "throw himself" by calling the attention of some other division or bureau to an error, misstatement, or misconception. This was done with an eye politeness, with many "fail-to-understand" and "bug-to-leave-attention" expressions. The certainty that an endorsement would make the recipient dig around for even more exasperating expression was a matter of openly expressed glee on the part of the clerk doing original work.

The new clerk found that his monthly salary was paid in two installments. He might draw up to one-half on the fifteenth, and as much before the thirtieth as he could cajole the disbursing clerk to let him have. On the last-named date he received the balance. He found that the rock-bottom price for existence was thirty dollars a month for board and room. Less than that was something like slow starvation, and he could pay as much more as he chose without securing startling results. This was for

two meals a day. Lunch cost him approximately \$5 a month more. Car fare was \$3 a month and laundry, minor repairs to clothes, and lesser expenses he could not keep track of, but he was surprised to find himself looking forward to payday after the month with eager anticipation. After six months he congratulated himself: "If pay day dawned and found him with cash on hand. Under these circumstances it was not hard to convince himself that he was entitled to, and ought to have, a raise."

Was in Lowest Strata.

In the interim he had familiarized himself with the clerical organization of the department. Not counting the messengers, who were in a separate class not in line of promotion except through passing another civil service examination, he was in the lowest strata. With him were others who were undergoing the six months' probation. Immediately above were clerks doing the same class of work, but who had been employed longer and received \$1,000. Next came the clerks in charge of files, stationery and supplies, and details of the routine at \$1,200 and \$1,400. The upper crust consisted of \$1,600 and \$1,800 clerks in charge of correspondence, "original work" and so on. These were topped by the chief clerk of division; he by the chief clerk of the bureau, and that distant functionary by a misty and awful personage, the chief clerk of the department. And these are the generations of the civil service.

At this time the new clerk became interested in his efficiency record. He learned that his daily work was estimated and noted; that these reports would determine whether he should be promoted when a vacancy occurred. He began to compare his work with that of others, and naturally rated his own too high. When the semi-annual report was made he was not the lowest in the room—that place was permanently occupied by a clerk who expected nothing better—but the new clerk was decorously toward the rear, and he was distinctly disappointed. Then he began to work for a record. The clerks under whom he worked complimented him, and he was certain that he was doing better work than anyone else in his grade. But, somehow or other, his efficiency report did not call attention to him as a valuable and painstaking employe whose work



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less should be recognized by immediate promotion. Somebody else was in line ahead. The margin was not wide, but it was enough.

They Talked It Over.

The nine hundred dollar clerk foregathered with an older clerk and talked it over. "X got the promotion," said the older

clerk, "because he has been here longer than you have, and because he is a Licker. I know he skins out of all the work he can, and loaf on the rest of us; but it's pretty hard to mark efficiency on this kind of work, and he kicked hard because he didn't get the promotion. You'll get yours next time."

And so it happened; but when it became necessary once more that pay days should occur promptly on the fifteenth and thirtieth, the clerk looked round again. It seemed to him, for he was fanciful, that there was something Dantesque in the thousand-dollar grade. It was the circle of the gathering of the mass of all sorts. There were those who swam round in their little pool without prospect of getting higher. There were those who had come down from higher grades and



"Thirty dollars a month. Less than that was something like slow starvation."

who tried to persuade themselves that they were on bottom. Yet all those who had reasonable expectations, those who had reached their limit, and those who had yet a step lower to go, were, each and every one, certain that but for rank injustice, the next promotion should be theirs. Reduced clerks seldom or never lose the hope of getting their old ratings back. Clerks, hopelessly in a grade that represents the limits of their possibilities can never understand why younger men are promoted over their heads. It is years since political influence has been able to do anything for clerks in the classified service, except perhaps to get them another chance after they run the risk of dismissal; but "pull" is cherished and nursed, hinted at and bragged about to a ridiculous degree.

When a Vacancy Occurs.

At intervals there was a stirring of the waters. A vacancy in the upper grades was canvassed, discussed, hoped for until the selection for the position was made and those who could have no possible chance of selection were disappointed as those who stood next to the door. About 50 per cent of the left-behinds in a given case will protest that they intend to get a transfer to another department without delay, and the rest will blame the efficiency markings.

The clerk under consideration did not linger long in the thousand-dollar grade. A twelve hundred dollar clerk under whom he was working resigned, and our clerk got the benefit of the extra application he thought had been wasted in the nine hundred dollar grade. He knew more about the work than any other clerk available, and was given the position.

It was in this grade that he found that efficiency markings are taken in a Pickwickian sense; that efficiency is

a subtle something made up of arbitrary markings modified by considerations based on information, so that in the ultimate the cards come to have an esoteric meaning that is wholly understood only by that patient personage, the appointment clerk, who reads them through a pair of spectacles entirely his own, and who is, in the main, correct in his translation of the symbols. He also learned that chiefs of subdivisions of a department are anxious to secure all the higher ratings allotted to that department, each for his own subdivision, and that, if all the recommendations for promotion were carried out, the clerks would fare very well, indeed. He also found that the modest man, the man who hides his light under a bushel, was generally left in undisturbed appreciation of its effluence, and that, up to a certain point, the protestant, the "kicker," got the thing he was after. But he also found that there was a point where kicking ceased to attract attention, and that thereafter the kicker joined the meek in oblivion.

No Outlet Upward.

During his incumbency of the twelve hundred dollar clerkship several instructive matters were presented for his contemplation. The phenomenon that chiefly interested him was that so far as he could see there was no outlet which led upward. He had arrived at the end of a clerical cul-de-sac. All the positions that he could see in advance were filled by men too old to lightly change their employment and too young to think of retirement by many years. It was true that he was living comfortably and found much of interest and enjoyment in Washington. He heard of good positions to be had in other departments; but on inquiry found that there was certainly a time of probation at a lower salary, which was not balanced by a certainty of getting the higher salaried position. He had an uncomfortable feeling that matrimony was assuming a formidable aspect under the circumstances.

Also, he saw a chief clerk reduced to a subordinate clerkship, and that is not a nice thing to have happen in one's intimate official circle. Outside of sympathetic feeling, there is a me-



"Foregathered with an older clerk and talked it over."

mento more to it that makes the remembrance stick. Thirdly, he was surprised and a little shocked to find that he was idle a good deal during the day. It was only by comparing his day's occupations with those of a previous year that he appreciated the difference, but he found that instead of practicing shorthand, etc., as he had thought, he was doing nothing but sitting at his desk and waiting for work to come.

Took Law Course.

It was soon after this realization came to him that he began to take a course in a law school. He was fortunate on graduation in being able to make a connection with the lawyer who had first employed him. The way was made comparatively easy for him to leave the Government employment, and the regular salary, and this clerk has entered on the practice of law under auspicious conditions, at least moderate success. He has made some reflections on the subject of the civil service which are as follows:

"I have been fortunate in my connection with the Government service, as it has given me the opportunity of preparing for a profession in a manner superior to what I could otherwise have obtained. At the same time, I remember the hundreds who have been so circumstanced that they were unable to leave Government employment and strike out for themselves.

"There are not many good positions in Government employment accessible from the classified service. "There are also many bright young men constantly striving for these places, and the large size of the ratio is on that of the strikers, and that is not a pleasant thing to have happen in one's intimate official circle. Outside of sympathetic feeling, there is a me-

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New Material Impressionable.

"Very much of the new material is impressionable, and is quickly modified and molded. In most cases it improves appreciably with even a short residence in Washington. "In promotion the personal equation has its influence. The academic system of marking for efficiency is absurd as a proposition by itself. As modified by those who have to deal with its results, it works with a reasonable amount of justice, though with inevitable cases of individual hardship. Here again rigidity and adherence to any given system would probably give inferior results.

"The pathos of the Government service lies in the absence of the expectation of a satisfactory outcome. While there is continuous employment at good pay during the productive years, the intangible surplus of friends and associations does not accumulate as in outside life. The clerk's world is the room in the department; outside of it he becomes almost a stranger. When he feels the competition of younger men, he has to meet it alone.

"The problem of the disposition of the old and disabled clerks in the Government service cannot be settled by proclaiming opposition to a civil pension list. It is a fact now. It could be administered at less expense if it were given its proper name. "Comparative efficiency cannot be ascertained until a standard of efficiency has been established. No one knows whether the Government work is being efficiently done. The most one can say is that it is being done."



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patient and tired attempt at clairvoyance, had picked his name from the list as being probably that of the least undesirable, and had wired to him to report. They turned him over to a glib-tongued official who rolled off stereotyped phrases as if they were single words, and the new clerk be-

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