

## HOW I OBTAINED MY APPOINTMENT.

BY A LADY CIVIL SERVANT.



WELL, I must do *something* for my living: that's certain!" I exclaimed, with the aggressive determination that so often results from a long inward conflict.

"How old are you, Annie?" asked Mary Shaw, who had dropped into tea on her way

home from the office.

"I was eighteen last birthday."

"Then, why not try for a Civil Service clerkship? The limits of age are eighteen to twenty. Have you a daily paper? Announcements of forthcoming open competitive examinations usually appear in the principal London and provincial newspapers on Thursdays."

I handed her a morning paper.

"Here it is: 'Lady Clerks in the General Post Office; at least thirty vacancies, September 15th; aged eighteen to twenty. Salary, £65 to £400 per annum, etc., etc.'"

"Does that mean there are thirty vacancies in your office, Mary?" I asked.

"Not necessarily. There are three departments in the General Post Office in which lady clerks are employed: the Savings Bank, the Clearing House, and the Postal Order Branch. Probably, the staff in all three departments will be recruited from the thirty successful candidates at the forthcoming open competitive examination; those whose marks entitle them to places high up on the list being allowed to select the department they prefer to enter, while the others will be called upon to fill the vacancies that remain after the more successful candidates have made their choice. Possibly, too, more than thirty candidates may obtain appointments, for the Post Office authorities have a way of under-estimating the requirements of the service."

"Is there much choice as to department?"

"The salary, the hours of attendance, and the leave is the same in all. But in the largest of the three, the work is rather more complex, and therefore more interesting; moreover, as this department is growing very rapidly, it offers a better chance of promotion than either of the other two."

"The salary is high, £65 to £400 per annum," I remarked, again glancing at the advertisement in the daily paper. "Is the salary regulated by the place one takes at the examination?"

"Oh no: all the clerks enter at £65, and rise by an annual increment of £3 to £100. Promotions to vacancies in the higher classes depend on merit. In my opinion it is better, when considering the advisability of competing for a Civil Service clerkship, not to let one's imagination soar beyond the maximum second-class salary of £100 per annum; not but what there is a very fair proportion of higher appointments.

It must, however, be borne in mind that many years have elapsed since women were first admitted, and that the higher classes are, therefore, replete. Of course, vacancies do occur, and with tolerable frequency, lady clerks being required to resign their appointments on marriage, while occasionally the increase in the work necessitates the creation of new higher appointments. But even when due allowance has been made both for retirement and growth, a junior clerk, although she may show exceptional aptitude for the work, cannot hope for promotion until she has been in the service some years. On the other hand, although most of us are apt to think we shall not hold our appointments long enough to entitle us to it, the pension does undoubtedly add greatly to the value of all Civil Service appointments. Nor must it be forgotten that a long interval is allowed to elapse before any deduction is made from the salary on the ground of illness. Think, too, of the annual leave—One whole month's holiday in each year, besides Bank Holidays and the Queen's Birthday!"

"Does the salary commence immediately on entering the service?"

"Yes. No clerk's appointment is confirmed until the authorities are satisfied as to her efficiency, but the initial salary of £65 per annum is paid during the whole term of probation."

"And what are the hours of attendance?"

"Seven hours on ordinary days, four on Saturdays. There is, however, a proviso in the regulations that the Saturday half-holiday is not to be granted unless the exigencies of the Public Service admit of it."

"But surely, my dear, you don't have to work seven hours without a break?" asked my mother, who was listening to all Mary Shaw said very attentively.

"Oh no; half-an-hour's interval is allowed in the middle of the day."

"I suppose, then, you young ladies take your luncheons with you?"

"We could if we liked. But as a matter of fact, we seldom trouble to do so, the provisions sold in the dining and luncheon rooms on the premises being good and very reasonable."

"Really these appointments seem most desirable in every way," I remarked musingly.

"Indeed they are!" agreed Mary warmly. "I attach the highest possible value to mine, I assure you."

"Is it quite nice employment for girls—lady-like, I mean?" asked my mother dubiously. Then remembering that, as Mary held one of these appointments herself, the question was not altogether polite, my mother added hurriedly: "Of course I know, my dear, that, left as your poor mother was with a large family, and—er—"

"In short, ours was a case in which beggars couldn't be choosers," laughed Mary, in her outspoken way.

"Still, I do not see why those more happily circumstanced than we were need hesitate to avail themselves of the many advantages that the position of Civil Service clerk offers. The duties are purely clerical, and the lady clerks are never brought into contact with the public."

"And are the lady clerks nice in themselves, my dear—well connected, and so on?"

"Yes; on the whole, I think we are quite sufficiently respectable," replied Mary, with a humorous twinkle. "When I entered, twelve years ago, in the old nomination days, we were very select indeed, only the daughters of professional men being eligible as nominees. Now, however, the daughters of the butcher, the baker, and the candlestick-maker can enter by the broad path of open competition. But it must be remembered that these young persons have emerged victorious from a very severe educational test, so that it is, perhaps, not unreasonable to assume that what they lack in gentle breeding is made up to them in intellectual pre-eminence. Of course there are times when we old ones sigh over our lost exclusiveness, but I fancy most of us are sufficiently liberal-minded to rejoice that the privileges of the few have given place to the just claims of the many."

"Is the entrance examination very difficult, then?" asked my mother.

"It comprises only the subjects that form the basis of an ordinary English education. The competition is, however, very keen."

"I don't think Annie would experience any difficulty in passing an examination in ordinary English subjects," remarked my mother, in a tone of conviction that subsequent events failed to justify. "She is accomplished too, you know."

Mary looked as if she thought that this might be a case in which the lesser is not necessarily included in the greater.

"A great many pass—that is, they reach a qualifying standard in each of the obligatory subjects—but only a small proportion obtain appointments," she said quietly.

"What is the percentage of successes?" I asked.

"That is rather a difficult question to answer, because the percentage varies with each examination. However, I do not think I shall be far wrong if I say that out of every ten competitors only one secures an appointment. But then the nine failures try again and again, as long as their ages are within the prescribed limits, so that perhaps two out of the nine are eventually successful, thus reducing the number of actual failures to seven in ten. Information on this point can, however, easily be obtained, the reprints of the papers set at former examinations, accompanied in nearly every case by a table of the marks assigned, being sold by Eyre & Spottiswoode, East Harding Street, Fetter Lane, London, E.C.,\* price sixpence each."

"How often are the examinations held?"

"Generally, twice a year; but occasionally the calls upon the reserve are not sufficient to necessitate the holding of bi-annual examinations."

"How should I intimate to the authorities that I wish to offer myself for examination?"

"You must write to the Secretary, Civil Service Commission, London, S.W., asking for the regulations for the forthcoming examination for female clerks in the General Post Office."

My mother and I talked the matter over long and earnestly; and in the end I wrote to the Civil Service Commissioners, as Mary Shaw had suggested.

By return of post I received a copy of the regulations, together with a candidate's form of application. This latter document was to be filled up, and sent in so as to be received at the Civil Service Commission by a given date, this date being about a fortnight prior to that fixed for the examination. In return, I was to receive an order for admission to the examination, with instructions as to the time and place\* at which I should be required to attend, and the manner in which the examination fee of five shillings was to be paid.

As Mary had said, the subjects in which I was to be examined were only those with which every middle-class English girl ought to be well acquainted. Nor did a cursory glance at former examination papers discourage me.

However, as I had two months in which to prepare myself, I thought I might as well refresh my memory a little by getting out my school-books, and dipping into them in a desultory way for a few hours each day.

But on the first day of the examination it certainly did occur to me that a more systematic study of these school-books might have stood me in better stead. Up-casting and cross-casting long rows and lines of figures may be easy enough in theory, but even these simple exercises are apt to become difficult in practice, especially when they have to be completed within a given time. One's handwriting, too, shows to better advantage in an exercise book than on *unlined* foolscap: nor are tabular statements exactly nice things to copy. A long chatty letter to a bosom friend may flow from the pen of the writer without conscious effort; but it may be found necessary to poise that same pen in mid-air many times while endeavouring to formulate one's ideas—granting the doubtful hypothesis that one has ideas—on the advantages and disadvantages of free education. Nor can it be denied that it is much easier to answer questions in grammar, geography, and history *mentally* than to reduce one's general and perhaps rather vague information on these subjects to a bald statement of facts in black and white.

It seems incredible now, but I suppose, when first I presented myself for examination, I did hope to obtain an appointment. But long before the two days' torture was over, I felt convinced that my feeble efforts were

\* These papers may also be purchased either directly, or through any bookseller, from the following agents: John Menzies & Co., 12, Hanover Street, Edinburgh, and 90, West Nile Street, Glasgow; and Hodges, Figgis & Co., 104, Grafton Street, Dublin.

\* For the convenience of candidates, these examinations are held simultaneously in London, Edinburgh, Dublin, Birmingham, Bristol, Leeds, Liverpool, Aberdeen, and Belfast.

not destined to receive recognition in the form of a Civil Service clerkship.

Still, although I thought I had parted with every vestige of conceit, it never even occurred to me that I could by any possibility have failed to reach the qualifying standard: I, who had invariably been at the top of my class at school.

Yet such was my fate. Never shall I forget my humiliation when first it dawned upon me that I was included in the two hundred odd candidates, each of whom had failed to qualify in one or more of the obligatory subjects. Rather over three hundred passed, and forty—in advertising the Post Office had, as Mary suspected, under-stated its requirements—obtained clerkships.

My mother thought there must be a big mistake somewhere, and urged me to write to the Civil Service Commissioners, demanding an explanation. But before following her advice, I thought I would have a word with Mary Shaw.

To my chagrin, Mary did not appear in the least surprised.

"Better luck next time," she said cheerily. "You see, what is really wanted is out-and-out thoroughness."

"But how am I to set about acquiring this out-and-out thoroughness?"

"In my opinion, the best way is to join one of the many really excellent classes that are now held in London and most of the large provincial towns for the preparation of intending candidates. These classes are advertised in all the daily papers. It is so all-important to know how to employ the time one has for preparation to the best advantage. But, above all, work hard."

I took Mary's advice, and with such happy results, that at the next open competitive examination I obtained my clerkship.

But before I pass on to my further experiences I must speak of another course that I discovered many of those who attend evening classes are following.

When a girl is between fifteen and eighteen, she competes for a Female Sortership in the General Post Office. Should she be so fortunate as to obtain one of these situations, she devotes her evenings to study. Then, as soon as she is eighteen, she presents herself at every examination held for clerkships, until she either obtains an appointment or completes her *twenty-fifth year, she being entitled to deduct from her actual age any time not exceeding five years, which she may have spent as a female sorter.*

The advantages of this course are obvious: the girl is earning money all the time she is preparing for a clerkship; assuming that examinations for clerkships

are held bi-annually, she has *fourteen chances instead of four*; should she obtain a clerkship, her official training will be of assistance to her in passing her probation, and should she fail to secure a clerkship, she still has her sortership to fall back upon.

On the other hand: there are probably physical objections to be urged against a girl's beginning her official career at so early an age: the position of female sorter is not nearly equal to that of lady clerk; and work during the day, with hard study in the evening, is a very severe tax on a girl's strength.

The duties of female sorters consist principally in sorting official documents. The hours of attendance are eight daily. The wages commence at twelve shillings per week, rising one shilling per week annually to fourteen shillings, and thence from one-and-sixpence per week annually to twenty-one-and-six. Promotions to vacancies in the higher class depend on merit. The examination for sorterships does not embrace as many subjects as that for clerkships, and the standard of proficiency in each subject is relatively lower. No candidate is eligible for a sortership who is less than four feet ten inches in height without boots.

Before entering upon my official duties, I had to undergo a medical examination. I did not think much of this at the time, but I have since discovered that to some it is a very formidable ordeal; for although positive disease be absent, delicacy of constitution may lead to rejection, and even want of general vigour does in some cases disqualify.

Then came my probation. Again my old faults asserted themselves. The work seemed so ridiculously simple while my instructress sat by my side, checking me each time I was about to make a slip; but when I essayed to go alone, my duties assumed a very different aspect. To my utter astonishment, I found that the pitfalls were many, and that I evinced quite a remarkable propensity for tumbling into them head foremost.

Again and again was I cautioned, until at length I thought seriously of inquiring whether the railway company would allow me anything for my season ticket in the not unlikely event of my having no further use for it. However, I managed to pull myself together just in time, and having eaten rather heartily of that unpalatable dish called "humble pie," and undergone a second medical examination, I was translated into a seventh heaven of delight by being informed that my appointment was confirmed.

Since that happy moment the anniversary of my official birthday has come and gone, and I have experienced a good many ups and downs, but I have not yet seen cause to regret the day I became

A LADY CIVIL SERVANT.

