

CLERKSHIPS.

By ALICE KING.

THE first two indispensable requirements for a female clerk are a good, bold, legible hand, and a thorough knowledge of spelling; these are not out of the range of ordinary capacities, they only need patience, a resolute correction of faults, and careful watchfulness. Lively, high-spirited girls, however, do not always like to practice themselves in the exercise of such good qualities as these, which are not exactly what naturally suit them; yet, to be female clerks they must compel themselves, in these respects, to do what is not very congenial to them. It is uninteresting work to write page after page, striving merely for clearness and distinctness in the formation of the characters, and thinking nothing about the words; it is dry work to learn by heart column after column of a dictionary, and then commit to paper what has been learnt, without leaving out a single letter. Yet, notwithstanding all the dullness and the dryness, such things must be done in the very best way that they can be, by those girls who wish to be female clerks.

The other subjects always entered upon in Government examinations for female clerkships are: arithmetic, geography, and history; therefore the girl who will make this her calling, must devote herself to these studies to the exclusion of others; they must all be gone into thoroughly, nothing like superficiality will meet with success. There must be no skimming, no swift leaping at conclusions, such as quick, intelligent female intellects are too apt naturally to indulge in, but everything must be studied slowly, steadily, and with full completeness. Another art which must be well mastered by young aspirants to female clerkships, is the art of punctuation: this is best done by frequent writing from dictation out of a printed book, and by carefully comparing together the printed page and the MS.

When a girl, meaning to be a clerk, is well assured that she writes a clear, legible hand, and that she knows how to place her stops with precision and correctness, she may next make it her business to learn shorthand, which will be a very useful acquirement in her calling. She should also, if possible, make herself mistress of French and German, so far as to be able to translate both these languages into good easy English, such as will fully convey the meaning of the foreign idiom. The best way of doing this is to take some superior French or German author, and to put a chapter from one of their books into English. There are frequent occasions in which Government clerks and clerks in mercantile houses have to translate French and German letters and documents into intelligible English.

Another point upon which girls, anxious to become clerks, should train themselves for their future duties, is in acquiring extremely methodical, regular, orderly habits. It is entirely impossible for anyone to make a good, reliable clerk without order and method in the way in which they go about their work; and this is why the young girl, training herself for a clerkship, must be very resolute to make these virtues her own in her daily work and habits; even the orderly arrangement of a drawer, or a workbox, or a portfolio, is a useful step in this direction.

If slovenly, disorderly habits are to be especially avoided by those girls who would obtain clerkships, so are all habits of wasting and trifling away time. A little while ago, in one of our humorous journals, an account was given of a supposed visit made by a gentleman, wanting to send a telegram, to a telegraph office where only female clerks were employed. One young lady was reading a story in a popular magazine, and could not possibly put it down till she had reached the end of the chapter;

a second was leisurely lacing up her boots, and would not stir till the operation was finished; a third, instead of attending to the business on which he had come, engaged him in a discussion about some interesting topic of the day. Thus it came to pass that so much time was wasted, it became too late for the telegram to be sent at all. The satire was a trifle severe, perhaps, but still it contains a useful lesson with regard to the proper value of time for all our girls who wish to make their calling in life that of a clerk.

The age for the admission of young women into clerkships in all our Government offices is from eighteen to twenty. It is, therefore, needful to begin very early in the training of our girls for clerks. As it is a respectable and also a tolerably lucrative way for unmarried women to gain their own livelihood, the salaries varying in the Government offices from £60 to £100 a year, it would be well if parents and schoolmistresses, and all those who direct the education of our girls, would carefully pick out those whose mental faculties and general capacities seem most likely to fit them for such work, and thoroughly prepare them for it; an industrious, persevering, clear-headed girl would, of course, be the one on whom the choice should fall for such training. In shops and similar places of business the salaries naturally run lower than in public offices; in these places the yearly salary is sometimes not more than £30. In all public offices a female clerk is dismissed when she marries, but this rule may, perhaps, not be so strictly observed in other places of business.

The hours of work for female clerks in our public offices are not excessive, and not at all beyond what an average woman's strength and health can bear. In these every possible arrangement is made for their comfort with regard to appointed times for meals, etc., and no one, except those who come on business, is allowed to disturb them during working hours. Still, a girl who enters on this calling must not conceal from herself that she will have to go through a certain amount of real, earnest, steady, continuous work, and that she must endure cheerfully some degree of restraint. She must not expect home-comforts and home-freedom; if she does, she will simply find herself grievously mistaken. She cannot have the good regular salary and at the same time sit lolling in her arm-chair reading a journal of fashion, or carrying on light gossip with her companions. If, however, she is ready to work with a will, and to work steadfastly and resolutely, putting her best endeavour into what she does, and not mind a few unavoidable inconveniences, she cannot choose a better calling than that of a clerkship.

The young woman who holds a clerkship has, of course, her own peculiar class of temptations and difficulties—and for which there is but one safeguard, one cure; namely, high Christian principle. Let those, then, who are training girls to take these situations endeavour to furnish them well with this armour of proof—this provision for the way; and let the girls themselves strive earnestly and prayerfully to make it their own. We must not and ought not to conceal from our girls that the vocation of a female clerk has temptations which do not attack young women in any other positions in life. But if they are true Christian girls—then we may send them forth with the calm and bright assurance that they will meet the struggle, and triumph in it by their great Captain's strength.

In the first place, in all houses of business there are temptations to dishonesty and falsehood, for of necessity great confidence has often to be put by the employer in his clerk. One first essential for such work is thorough, unflinching, uncompromising truthfulness; let our Christian girls be trained to be true as steel.

Another temptation is to idleness. The female clerk is often left for many hours without the eye of a superior resting on her; therefore, if she chooses to cheat her employers by loitering over her work and wasting in laziness the time for which she is paid, she can do it with impunity; or she can add up a column of accounts in a spirit of careless idleness, making, as she does so, the most egregious mistakes, and very likely without ever being even dimly aware of what she has done. She, however, who is the true handmaid of the Master, will never do her work in this slovenly way; she will keep in mind, as she sits down to her desk, the words, "Be not slothful in business, but fervent in spirit, fearing the Lord."

The young clerk, too, is more her own mistress, in some ways, than is usual for girls of her age. She has the guardianship of her character and her respectability very much in her own hands, and she should, therefore, wrap closely round her a veil of delicate modesty, a mantle of quiet dignity. The purity of her Christian womanhood should make a perpetual halo about her in which she should move, as she treads a path which must, of necessity, often bring her in close contact with things and people that are of the world, worldly. In this respect a young clerk needs more especially to have her feet set firm on the Rock of Ages.

When a young woman is thus well furnished with all the power and all the sweetness of Christian womanhood, there cannot be the smallest objection to her making a clerkship her calling in life. There are, we are aware, still strong prejudices in the minds of some people on the subject, but they are prejudices simply without any reasonable foundation. They say women are not reliable enough for such work, but if they are deemed reliable enough by their Heavenly King to have placed in their hands, as mothers, the training of children who are inheritors of eternal life, surely they are reliable enough to have the work of the office or the counting-house entrusted to them. Some people have a vague notion that the work is not womanly; but why should there be anything more unwomanly in handling a pen than a needle? It is work which requires neatness, and order, and silence, and collected thought; it is work that does not require physical strength; surely then it is work which is essentially womanly.

Our girls may perhaps think, and so may their relations and friends, that such an earnest, realistic calling as that of a clerk will burden their young lives so heavily that all the sparkle and spriteliness of their youth will be pressed out of them, and that they will thus be made old women before their time. This is, however, an idea which may be dismissed at once, if a girl has a well-balanced, healthy mind, such as we should strive to train all our young women to have, as part of the fair endowment with which we would send them out into life. When business hours are over, a girl whose spirits are bright, and cheery, and bird-like, as the spirits of every Christian girl should be, will laugh as gaily and tread with as airy a step, and shed as much sweet radiance from her eyes as she who, instead of sitting behind a desk intent on grave, responsible duty, has been loitering away her day in a string of vain trifles; she will slip softly out of her business trammels, and, for the late grave restraint, will be all the brighter in her home.

Let us train our girls, whom we intend to be clerks, to be true to themselves, to be true to their employers, most of all to be true to their Master in Heaven. Let our girls, who would make clerkships their calling, so train themselves, putting their best effort with Christian strength into what they undertake from the beginning, and they shall walk through the world on a high, fair path, till they reach the gates of the Golden City.