

COMMISSIONER ROOSEVELT REPLIES TO A CRITIC *

Washington, D. C., Dec. 13, 1889.

CHARLES R. LANE, Esq., *Secretary, Indiana Civil Service Reform Association, Richmond, Ind.*

My dear Sir: I have just received from you the slip, which I re-enclose, from the Cincinnati *Commercial Gazette*. It contains a communication, dated December 8 at Indianapolis, and signed with the initials "W. H. S.," in relation to civil-service reform. It is weary work to expose repeatedly the absolutely unblushing mendacity of a certain set of men who seem to make it their chief business in life, at present, to howl against the Civil Service Law; but, apparently, it is a necessary work. At any rate, when a string of falsehoods such as those contributed by "W. H. S." are published in a paper of the standing of *The Commercial Gazette*, it is incumbent on some one to correct them.

"W. H. S.," whose name is, as I am informed, W. H. Smith, gives a series of questions which he asserts the Civil Service Commission have asked applicants for positions as letter-carriers at Indianapolis. Some of these questions are genuine, and, what is more, they are perfectly proper to ask; and any person of average intelligence who is fitted to go into the postal service of the United States ought to be able to answer them. If this particular correspondent's intelligence is as limited as his truthfulness, I suppose even these questions would puzzle him. As a matter of fact, he does not seem to be able to tell the truth, even when there

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is no particular object to be gained by refraining from doing so; for but one of the questions he gives was actually asked in the letter-carriers' examination he refers to, as held four months ago in Indianapolis. A number of them, however, were asked in other examinations, such as those held for clerkships in the post-office or in the railway-mail service, where it was undoubtedly proper to ask them. Thus, a clerk in the postal service ought to know some of the principal towns on the Mississippi River north of the Ohio—a question which apparently dumfounds the above-mentioned correspondent. He ought, likewise, to know the names of the Northeastern States; and he should be able to tell some of the most important railway centres of the United States. Any person of average intelligence fit to occupy a position of responsibility in the postal service of the United States, where a knowledge of United States geography is essential for the proper performance of his duties, should be able to answer simple questions entirely pertinent to the routine of his daily business.

Most of the other questions which "W. H. S." quotes are simply inventions: not only have we never asked them, but we have never asked any like them. For instance, when he states that we asked in a letter-carriers' examination, or any other similar examination, What is the distance from the earth to the planet Mars? he utters a falsehood, and a very ridiculous falsehood at that. His statement that we asked in a similar examination, What was the fastest time ever made by a sailing-vessel from New York to San Francisco, sailing around the cape? is a falsehood. When he states that we asked in the examination he refers to, or any similar one, how many square miles there are in Lake Michigan, he states a falsehood; and, when he says that we asked

what county in New York is without a railroad, he utters another falsehood. When he states that we asked the name of the highest mountain peak in the United States, he utters another falsehood; and so I might go on indefinitely. He states that we asked, in an examination for copyists and clerks in Washington, what sort of government prevailed in Bulgaria. This, again, is a falsehood. Questions of this sort are never asked ordinary clerks and copyists. I presume that, in some muddled way, he is thinking of an examination for the State Department, where an extensive knowledge of foreign geography is needed, and where, in consequence, we very properly examine candidates about the geography of the Old World. For ordinary clerks and copyists at Washington, we never ask any question in geography, save about the United States; and, really, a man who wishes to serve Uncle Sam ought to know the rudimentary facts concerning the history and geography of his own country. He complains of the arithmetic questions asked in the last carriers' examination at Indianapolis. These papers, like those used in the same examination for geography, are before me as I write; and they are perfectly proper in every sense of the word. A man intelligent enough to be a good carrier should know how to add, subtract, divide, and multiply; and our questions tested him on just these points. Be it remembered that, in our carriers' examination, we give the heaviest weight to the questions which test the man's knowledge of the local geography—that is, the streets, public buildings, etc., of the city in which he is to deliver the mails; and this is certainly practical.

As for "W. H. S.'s" account of a reported conversation with myself, I can only say that neither I nor my

colleagues have any recollection of its taking place; and that it certainly could not have taken place, as he says it did, for the very good reason that the question he instances as giving rise to it was a purely imaginary one. We have never asked any one to name the rivers on which all the capitals of the States were situated; and, in particular, during my term of service on the Commission, we have never asked what river Columbus is on. It is therefore evident that the correspondent of *The Commercial Gazette* must have either made this conversation up out of whole cloth or else twisted out of all shape some conversation which may have taken place, although, as I said before, I do not in the least recollect it.

I have now taken up, *seriatim*, specimen statements of those contained in this correspondent's letter. Whether he has been grossly deceived himself, and is of so credulous a character as to believe whatever is told him, or whether he deliberately penned a string of falsehoods which he knew to be falsehoods, and sent them to *The Commercial Gazette*, I know not. At any rate, if you choose to request any one whom you know at Washington (and for a preference I would suggest the Congressman from your district or the Washington correspondent of some Indianapolis paper) to come up to the rooms of the Civil Service Commission, I will gladly place at his disposal all our past papers that have been used in the examinations for letter-carriers (or for any other positions, for that matter); and he can particularly inspect those papers used in the examination referred to by "W. H. S.," which took place four months ago in Indianapolis, and can thus easily convince himself of the absolute falsity of the statements of "W. H. S." which reflect in any manner on the Commission.

It would be well for *The Commercial Gazette* to instruct their correspondent in Indianapolis hereafter to be either less credulous or more truthful. I forward you herewith two copies of the geography and also of the arithmetic papers used in the particular carriers' examination he refers to, that you may yourself compare them with his statements, and with your own eyes see what falsehoods he has penned.

We conduct examinations for scores of different places; and, in order that they may be practical business tests, it is necessary to have the examinations differ as widely in character as do the places sought. We ask candidates for the position of assistant astronomer or assistant chemist or for clerkships in the office of *The Nautical Almanac* questions in astronomy or chemistry or higher mathematics. Of course, a candidate for the place of assistant astronomer can naturally be expected to know about the planet Mars; and, if any question on this subject ever has been asked in any of our examinations, it has been in one of this character, and "W. H. S.," or his informant, has not possessed the requisite mental capacity to understand that the inquiries addressed to letter-carriers differ from those addressed to assistant astronomers. Our examinations are, as a whole, eminently common sense and practical. We test a railway-mail clerk on his knowledge of United States geography, on his knowledge of the local railway routes and connections, and on his skill in reading addresses. We test a would-be astronomer in astronomy. To speak as if we asked a candidate for one place questions only asked a candidate for an entirely different place is simply dishonest.

Of course, in preparing literally thousands of papers, it is inevitable that occasionally some questions should

slip through which it would be better to leave unasked. But it must be remembered that any one such question cannot count for more than perhaps one per cent of the whole mark given, and failure to answer it will affect a man but little. I have examined as carefully as my many other duties would allow all the questions issued since I have been Commissioner; and, as far as I am aware, none of them have been improper or impractical. My attention has been called, however, to two or three questions used each in some one or two examinations in time past which ought not, as I hold, to have been used; and strict orders have been given that neither these nor any of similar character be hereafter issued. There are bound to be occasional slips of this sort; and whenever they, or any similar shortcomings, are pointed out to us, we instantly try to remedy them. We welcome any and all honest criticism. Our methods are of course not perfect; but we are trying to make them as nearly so as may be, and with a constantly increasing measure of success. At any rate, I challenge the production of a series of examination papers, now or recently in use, where the questions, taken as a whole, are not perfectly proper and practical.

In conclusion, let me answer your question about our method of ascertaining the moral character of the applicant. We make all applicants for the departmental or railway-mail services, the only services for which the examinations are conducted by our Central Board at Washington, furnish vouchers from three reputable citizens, testifying in the most explicit terms that they know the applicant personally, that he is a man of good standing in the community, of known morality, and that they would themselves employ him in a business

where they would have to repose trust in his honesty, and would recommend him for such employment to their personal friends. As regards the local customs and postal services, we leave these inquiries to be made by the appointing officers themselves. Wherever a postmaster in one of our big cities, for instance, has a certification made to him, it contains three names. It is his duty, then, to make inquiry into the fitness and standing in the community of the three men thus certified to him. Not only do we expect him to make a rigid investigation as to their character and morality, but we even allow him, if, after this investigation has been made, he finds that he is not satisfied with the character of any of the three thus certified, to reject them all, giving his reasons in writing and at full length for doing so, and to call for a new certification. It will thus be seen that the charge that our system does not permit and encourage as an indispensable preliminary the strictest inquiry into an applicant's morality and personal character is absolutely baseless.

Thanking you for having called my attention to these charges, I am

Very truly yours,

THEODORE ROOSEVELT.