

(editor's note: This paper was transcribed from a handwritten cursive copy with various difficulties. For a perfect rendition, the reader might wish to consult the original, itself a copy, in the volume entitled *Literary Club Papers*, Dec 20, 1890 to May 30, 1891)

Is the Civil Service Civil?

Mr. Editor

It is not my intention to inflict on the club through you any remarks concerning the importance or advantage of what is known as civil service reform. I take it that we are all agreed on it.

There is however one phase of the question which I believe is rarely given much attention and possibly less thought, and that is the manner of our civil servants, and here I use the word servants with the gentlest deference to that haughty class and if necessary might offer you any number of quotations from the remarks of many distinguished demagogues to support the view that all good office seekers are anxious to become the servants of the people.

The unsophisticated absurdly expect them to behave as servants [who] should when they receive the reward they have sought either through the influence of the "boss" or through the method that we believe gives them a mark of distinction the civil service examination. It is one of the delusions of the unsophisticated that manner is not one of the lost arts in this "husteling" and plutocratic age.

They believe also that Jefferson would have added civility to the tests of honesty and capability had he not feared that his rabid partisans would suspect him of conceding too much to the tender sensibilities of his bitter opponents – the Federalists, the "silk stocking" element of his day. However that may be it is undoubtedly true that civility is not regarded as a necessary qualification for minor office in the public service, and by public service it is not believed governmental positions should be solely included. When we reach that ideal to which we are slowly but surely pending we shall be able to do something toward reforming our bank clerks and our railway officials of the minor sort. The time for the hotel clerk may be far off but it will come if the press paragraphs have not wholly changed him and it is apparent now that they have not labored altogether in vain.

When the happy time comes we shall be subjected no longer to such men as the long bearded Hessian who dealt out stamps in the window of the Post-Office for so many years. I don't know whether he passed an examination to secure his place but he was undoubtedly honest and capable and remained a long time until he had earned the terror of all women and bitter hatred of most men.

His manner was overbearing and rough to a degree and consistently so. He was not a man of moods but with a fixed purpose to make his power felt to those who were unfortunate enough to come without his window.

How our efficient Postmaster rid the office of him I don't know but if there was a fracture of the law in the powers, I, as a good civil reformer, am prepared to give a contented wink at it. His successor could hardly be called an improvement. He lacked the ferocious look and the savage voice of the Hessian but his heavy face was a picture of sullen insolence and it may be noted that the expression seldom changed. He was not a man of moods either. He did not stay very long, and his departure was brought about through a slight misunderstanding between his rights as a citizen and his duty to his employer.

He happened to be a candidate to represent his precinct in a convention which was to nominate a Constable and finding that his official duties at the post office would prevent his presence at the polls he quietly determined to give his attention to his political rights as every good civil servant should, and promptly closed his window in the faces of the unsophisticated who were waiting to buy stamps.

The morning papers stated that Peter Zimmerman had been discharged by the postmaster for closing his stamp window before the regular hour, and one of them had a sensational article with flaming headlines calling the attention of its readers to the gross outrage that had been perpetrated on a citizen who was demanding a free born right. The word "tyranny" was used in describing the action of his superior. But the unsophisticated did not mourn for Zimmerman's rights or his wrongs. They were glad to have done with him and were no doubt well satisfied with the courteous young men who are now in possession of the stamp Windows. But if there is occasionally an uncivil fellow in the post office he is a small figure when compared with the uncivil bank clerk. I'm glad to say that most bank officials are obliging and courteous, but there are exceptions and Howard Flesher was one of them, but I must tell you how I met Flesher.

It was shortly after the failure of the Fidelity when I happened along Third Street one morning. I met my friend Tripp. I told Tripp I wanted to have a check cashed and would like to open a small account. Trip is something of a "brother" and likes to help his friends along. He promptly ushered me into a bank saying "This bank is A. 1." I remembered that they had said that of the Fidelity but said nothing. We walked up to the teller's desk. "Howard" said he to the teller "this is my friend Jones. He wants to open an account with you. Jones, give him your card." Flesher nodded slightly and I believe grunted. I gave him the card as directed. He glanced at it and threw it on the floor. I began to feel [] and wondered what he would do with the money expecting him to treat it likewise but he didn't. I was gruffly told that I might go around and sign the book. I did so mechanically and Tripp excusing himself I stepped out. Walking up Walnut St. gave me time to recover. I remembered at the Fidelity everybody had been very polite but they had robbed me. There was a bank where one might expect to be cuffed out at any time and I fancied that Tripp was right. It must be A. 1. It was probably over run with business and the Teller had been instructed to insult and annoy in every possible way those who had individual accounts.

I have since learned that they have another teller who handles the larger accounts. A very

pleasant fellow too – but I rarely saw him. Flesher was at the desk whenever I meekly presented myself. He continued with apparently no effort, to be as surly as possible. My bills were not arranged to suit him and if I transgressed the unwritten banking rules in any way by failing for an instance to place the name of the state after some small town on which the check was drawn I was informed of it in a loud voice and told that “This bank ain't a post office directory.” The other poor devils who were waiting their turn behind me and who like myself wanted to support the bank because it was A. 1. grinned sympathetically and one overhearing some harsh words that I muttered said “Pshaw! I don't mind that. You ought to hear Fleischer when he is full “He ain't a marker when he is sober.”

The bank continued in its efforts to drive off individuals and certainly Flesher was adapted by nature and improved by art for the function he was engaged in. But with singular perversity the individual refused to be driven off. Their consolation was that the Bank was A. 1. A few months ago when there was reported a “tight money market” Flesher was missing from his post and we then realized that the Bank no longer despised the little fellows. Their accounts were not subject to great variations and they were seldom troublesome in soliciting loans. I have heard it hinted since Flesher disappeared there has been a slight falling off in individual accounts, but this is probably an idle rumor. Flesher and I have a mutual friend, Blooker and I have laid bare my feelings about the teller to Blooker many times.

Blooker is one of the most charitable of men and insists that Flesher is a very good fellow, a trifle impetuous perhaps, but very good hearted and when I replied that one might say that of great many lunatics he is horrified, but I believe I used a word other than lunatic. I am reminded that Flesher has a fine position in society and that he led the German at the Cliff ball a few weeks ago and that the Cliffs are among our very best people and that they think a great deal of him. Blooker has what the Society Editor of the Commercial Gazette calls social aspirations which is very right and proper in him of course but I am inclined to believe that as “a good climber” he feels it his duty to sustain those who are a few rounds above him on the latter – I will do him justice to say that he differs from most “climbers” in not attempting to throw any mud from his shoes on those who are a few rounds below him. But we all know Blooker he has been a guest of the club several times, and I have often asked him to allow me to put him up for a membership, but he says an organization which lacks the refining presence of women is apt to degenerate into harshness and animalism.

I am not sure that he is altogether wrong – His taste leads him to prefer the literary circle of both men and women where the essays have a religious tone and the refreshments consist in conversation, ice cream and lemonade. I believe Blooker has a keen appreciation of himself in declining to come in with us.

Some rude fellows have said of him that he was “a perfect lady” But despite a feminine manner I am convinced of his masculinity from little confidences he has given me concerning some indiscretions. He may lack vigor but he is not lacking in civility. But to come back to Flesher I often tell Blooker of a young clerk who was in the Court House a

few years ago and of whom I have been told by Tompkins. This young man was known to his intimates as Cock-a-Loo Rooney and was born and bred in the Deer Creek precinct. He led the life for years as a Deer Creek tough but was never guilty of an[y] felonious acts. He was in many drunken rows and possibly stood by while his companions “held up” a wayfarer. It is not improbable that some of our Walnut Hills members may have met him, some pleasant Sunday morning as they were laboriously climbing the hill after a 32° symposium in the halcyon days of the inner circle. But be that as it may, as Cock-a-Loo grew older he became a quiet citizen if not an ideal one. He took an interest in politics, and represented his precinct in many conventions of his party. It was through this method that he secured a position in the Court House. If he had ever given Civil Service reform a thought, he probably sneered at it as fit only for dudes and not for “workers” of which class he was proud to term himself a member.

Tompkins, who by the way is a lawyer and has a taste for politics, has often told me what an admirable clerk this Cock-a-Loo was. He was prompt. He was invariably courteous, and was of great assistance to the lawyers in many ways. When I heard all this I thought of Flesher. I remembered that his father now dead had been an educated, kindly, hospitable gentleman and that his home life had been an enviable one. When I learned that his brothers were occupying positions of trust in other cities and were esteemed as gentlemen, I wondered what there was in inheritance and how little there could be in [before]. But Blocker could not agree that a Deer Creek tough was fit or could be fitted for any position requiring intelligence and a medium of education. I don't know that Cock-a-Loo could pass an examination which required a knowledge of algebra or geometry, but if I happened to be an examiner and he and Flesher were competitors for a position, I am afraid I might be tempted to overlook a little weakness in grammar or a looseness of construction and in the interest of a Civil Service that should be civil cast my vote for Cock-a-Loo.

George Ryan

[no date – 02/28/1891?]