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George Otto Trevelyan
Excerpt
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L E T T E R S

FROM A

COMPETITION WALLAH.

LETTER OF INTRODUCTION.

To the Editor of Macmillan's Magazine.

DEAR SIR,—Though feeling some hesitation in approaching (metaphorically) the editorial sanctum, there are occasions when diffidence is out of place ; and I think that you will allow that this comes under that category. But, without any further preface, I will plunge at once *in medias res*, and tell you my whole story from the very beginning.

The gentleman (and scholar), whom I wish to introduce to your notice, is Mr. Henry Broughton, my earliest and most attached friend. Throughout our school career—which we passed together in the classic groves and along the banks of Radley—to call us Damon and Pylades would have been to “damn with faint praise.” Together we chased the bounding ball ; together we cleft the yielding wave ; together we studied ; together we attended Divine worship ; together we should have passed the hours of the night,

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had not the regulations of that excellent institution confined us to our separate cubicles. Our characters were admirably fitted to supply what was wanting in the other. My mind was of the class which develops late, and which, while it gives abundant promise to the observant eye, too often fails to be appreciated by those immediately around. His reached its maturity early. I was the more thoughtful and the intellectualler of the two; he the more practical and the quick-sighted. I oftentimes found myself unable to express the high thoughts that welled inside me, while he carried off all the school-prizes. In the fulness of time we followed each other to college—to the college ennobled by more than one enduring world-wide friendship—to the college of Tennyson and Henry Hallam. In our new phase of life we were still as intimate as ever at heart, though, outwardly speaking, our social spheres diverged. He lived with the men of action; I with the men of thought. He wrote and talked, wielded the oar and passed the wine-cup, debated on the benches of the Union high questions of international morality and ecclesiastical government; I conversed with a few kindred souls about, or pondered out in solitude, the great problems of existence. I examined myself and others on such points as these: Why were we born? Whither do we tend? Have we an instinctive consciousness? So that men would say, when they saw me in the distance, “Why was Simkins born? Is he

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[More information](#)

Why Mr. Broughton went out. 3

“tending hither? Has he an instinctive consciousness “that he is a bore?” I gloried in this species of intellectual persecution. I was the Socrates, Broughton the Alcibiades, of the University. His triumphs may be read in the Cambridge Calendar and the club-room of First Trinity; mine are engraven deep in the minds which I influenced and impressed with my own stamp. However, to come to the point, as we were lounging in the cloisters of Neville’s Court on an evening in March, 1860, the conversation happened to turn on an Indian career. Broughton spoke of it with his wonted enthusiasm, maintaining that the vital object to be looked for in the choice of a line in life was to select one that would present a succession of high and elevating interests. I, on the contrary, was fired at the idea of being placed with almost unlimited power among a subject-race which would look up to me for instruction and inspiration. What a position for a philosopher! What for a philanthropist! Above all, what for a philosophic philanthropist! We forthwith sent in our names for the approaching competitive examination. For the result of that examination I do not pretend to account. Broughton, who was lamentably ignorant of modern literature; who was utterly unable to “give a “brief summary of the opinions held by, and a sketch “of the principal events in the life of Heraclitus, Dr. “Darwin, Kant, or Giordano Bruno;”—Broughton, who, when asked for the original source of the quota-

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[More information](#)

4 *Why Mr. Simkins stayed at home.*

tion, "When Greek meets Greek," said that when Greek met Greek he probably inquired whether he intended to vote for Prince Alfred, Jefferson Davis, the Duke of Saxe Coburg, Panizzi, or any other man ;— Broughton, I say, passed third on the list, being beaten only by a student from Trinity College, Dublin, and a gentleman educated at Eton, where he resided exactly three weeks, and a private tutor's, with whom he passed seven years. As for myself, I have since been convinced that an examiner, whose name I willingly suppress, was shocked by my advanced opinions on the destination and progress of our race. This fact, together with a certain dash and freedom of style which continually peeps through, and which is more prone to disgust than to fascinate those with whom my fate lies, sufficed to exclude me from among the successful candidates. Our readers may possibly have heard, when the fire burns low on a winter night, and ghost-tale succeeds ghost-tale, and the trembling circle draw closer in round the blazing hearth—on such an occasion my readers may have heard a story of two friends who made a compact in life that, if one of them died first, he should appear to the other and disclose to him what he knew of the secrets of the grave. While the result of the examination was still pending, we agreed, in imitation of these friends, that, if one only of us survived the ordeal, he should write to his home-staying comrade a full account of his Indian expe-

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[More information](#)

How the Letters came to be written. 5

riences. Broughton has been true to our contract and, knowing that you had formerly expressed your willingness to insert a production of his pen (you may remember that your wish was conveyed in the same letter in which you informed me—with thanks—that you could not find space for my article on “The Subjectivity of Buckle”), I determined to transmit you his letters for publication.

Sincerely yours,

CHARLES SIMKINS, B.A.

Trin. Coll. Cant.

P.S.—I send you under cover a trifle which has occupied a few of my idle moments. It is somewhat in the vein of Browning. If you think the imitation too pronounced, or if, on the other hand, the originality of the little thing appears too marked to be graceful in a young author, pray do not hesitate to reject it.

LETTER I.

CALCUTTA, Jan. 24, 1863.

DEAR SIMKINS,—Indian travellers usually commence their first letter by describing their earliest impression upon landing in Calcutta. With some it is musquitoes ; with others, Warren Hastings ; while others, again, seem divided between an oppressive consciousness of heathendom and hot tiffins. My prevailing feeling was negative : it was the absence of Dundreary. The sense of relief at being able to ask a question without being told that it was “one of those things that no fellah “could understand,” was at first delightfully soothing. On the whole, the current English slang is at a discount in the market here.

I did not write during the first fortnight, as I was in very low spirits, and nothing encourages that state of mind so much as trying to communicate it to others. There is no doubt that the situation of a young civilian has much in it that is very trying. His position is precisely that of a new boy at school. I was continually expecting to hear the familiar question, “What’s your “name, you fellow ?” Nobody, however, seemed to care enough about me to ask. There are so many young

Loneliness of a young Civilian. 7

civilians that older residents cannot afford to show them attentions until they have earned themselves an individuality. Every one has been a "student" in his day, with the same hopes, the same aspirations, the same anxiety about passing in Persian. Just as the magnates of undergraduate life at the University refuse to see in an ardent freshman the future Craven Scholar or Member's prizeman; even so the judges of the High Court and the Secretaries to Government are slow to extend their favour and encouragement to budding Metcalfes and possible John Peters. As a set-off, however, against the insignificance of student life, there is the certainty that each year will bring with it an increase in importance and social position. A civil servant of ten years' standing, who has not plenty of friends and a sufficiency of admirers, must either be singularly undeserving or exquisitely disagreeable.

The sensation of loneliness is much aggravated by the present system of selecting and training the members of the Indian Civil Service. In old days a Writer came out in company with a score of men who had passed the last two years of their English life in the same quadrangle as himself. He found as many more already comfortably settled, and prepared to welcome and assist their fellow collegian; and, in his turn, he looked forward to receiving and initiating a fresh batch at the end of another six months. Haileybury formed a tie which the vicissitudes of official life could never break. In the swamps of

Dacca, in the deserts of Rajpootana, amidst the ravines and jungles where the Khoond and the Santhal offer an intermittent but spirited opposition to the advance of civilization and the permanent settlement, wherever two Haileybury men met they had at least one set of associations in common. What matter if one wore the frock-coat of the Board of Revenue, while the other sported the jack-boots and solah topee of the Mofussil Commissioner? What matter though Brown swore by the Contract Law and Sir Mordaunt Wells, while Robinson was suspected of having lent a sly hand in pushing about the Nil Durpan? Had they not rowed together on the Lea? Had they not larked together in Hertford? Had they not shared that abundant harvest of medals which rewarded the somewhat moderate exertions of the reading-man at the East Indian College? This strong *esprit de corps* had its drawbacks. The interests of the country were too often postponed to the interests of the service. But the advantages of Haileybury outweighed the defects.

Our situation is very different. Few of us are lucky enough to have more than two or three acquaintances among the men of our own years; and, while our seniors persist in looking on us as a special class, we have no bond of union among ourselves. At Cambridge you must have observed that freshmen regard freshmen with a peculiar suspicion and shyness; and I sometimes think that it is the same with the novices of the Civil Ser-

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Wallah Stories.

9

vice. It is some time before we acquire the aplomb, the absence of which characterises the reading-man of the University. I use the word "aplomb" in order to avoid your darling term "self-consciousness," that treasured discovery of a metaphysical age. When a man describes himself as "self-conscious," I always think of the American fugitive bawling out to an officer who attempted to rally his regiment, "For Heaven's sake, do not stop me; I am so fearfully demoralised." The stories against the Competition Wallahs, which are told and fondly believed by the Haileybury men, are all more or less founded on the want of *savoir faire*. A collection of these stories would be a curious proof of the credulity of the human mind on a question of class against class. They remind one of nothing so much as of the description in "Ten Thousand a Year" of the personal appearance, habits, and morals of the supporters of the Reform Bill.

For instance :

Story showing the Pride of Wallahs.—A Wallah being invited to dinner by a Member of Council, went out before the whole company.

Story showing the Humility of Wallahs.—A Wallah, on a visit to the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, being urged to sit down, replied that he knew his place better. (Be it observed that the Lieutenant-Governor denies the story with all its circumstances.)

Their want of familiarity with polite society.—

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[More information](#)

10

More Wallah Stories.

A Wallah, having occasion to write to the daughter of a man high in office, addressed her as :

Miss White,
&c., &c.,
Barrackpore.

Some anecdotes are more simple, such as : a Wallah, riding on a horse, fell into a tank ; or, a Wallah, seeing a rifle, thought it was a musket.

The idea entertained by the natives is droll enough : they say that another caste of Englishmen has come out. A common complaint among the magistrates and commissioners up country is, that many of the young men who have lately joined lack the physical dash and the athletic habits that are so essential in India. When some three or four Englishmen are placed over a province as large as Saxony, an officer who cannot drive a series of shying horses, or ride across country, is as useless as a judge who suffers from headache in a badly-ventilated courthouse. A commissioner of Police told me that on one occasion, when a district in Bengal was in a very inflammable state on account of the Indigo troubles, he marched up in hot haste with a strong force, and requested the civil officer to meet him on the way. To his ineffable disgust that gentleman came to the rendezvous in a palanquin. It was not by travelling about in palanquins that Wake and Mangles and their fellows, in the midst of a hostile population, with small hope of succour, bore up against frightful