

Three Master Craftsmen - By Charles T. Cragin - [Originally published in 1924.]

Since I began teaching a good many years ago in the old Bryant & Stratton Business College owned by that eccentric genius, George A. Gaskell - then perhaps the best known penman in America through his extensive advertising of the Gaskell Compendium - I have met a good many of the Master Craftsmen of pen and ink. Most of them have passed on to the 'great majority,' though a few old-timers like [Fielding] Schofield and [Henry] Flickinger - finest of them all - still remain on this side of the veil.

I have been quite intimately acquainted with three who are admitted headliners in Chirographic [i.e., Calligraphic] Art, and in this, my first contribution to the Business Educator, after a long period of illness, I wish to pay tribute to them in order of their passing.

LOUIS MADARASZ (1859-1910)

I think it will be readily admitted by all who know anything about the art of fine writing that Louis Madarasz never had an equal for dashing, brilliant, off-hand work done with a pure muscular movement. 'Maddy' was a queer genius. I remember well the first time I ever saw him on the streets of Manchester. He had just blown in from Texas via Rochester, N.Y., where he had spent a short period in the R.B.I. [Rochester Business Institute]. He wore a broad brim hat and looked like one of the Texas Rangers slightly dressed up for the East,- but he could write then, and he came to Gaskell for inspiration, for he, like thousands of others, had bought the 'Compendium' and adopted the dashing style of Gaskell, who in his day was a superb ink slinger.

I never saw anybody quite like this odd Hungarian. He was always about to make fabulous sums of money in various unique methods. The last time I saw him, a few years before his death, he was headed for Goldfield, Nevada, where he was going to dig vast quantities of yellow metal and enrich Dennis, myself, Healey, and perhaps other friends of his. Healey and I one day had a 'possum dinner with Madarasz and his devoted and charming wife. 'Maddy' cooked the 'possum himself, and it was good. He didn't catch it on the east side of New York where he was living at that time, but some friend sent it up from Texas, and Maddy cooked it to the accompaniment of his endless cigarettes. He had nerves of iron. They say cigarettes shake a penman's nerves, but Madarasz smoked all the time when he wasn't in school, except in the few hours he devoted to sleep, and I imagine he went to bed with a cigarette burning.

CHARLES PAXTON ZANER (1864-1918)

The second, and in many respects the most talented of these three master craftsmen was the lamented editor, for many years, of this publication. Seventeen years ago I received a letter from him, asking me to contribute to the Business Educator, and I have inflicted a lot of stuff on that publication from that time until this. I met Mr. Zaner personally only a few times at teachers' conventions, where his charming wife generally accompanied him, but we had a good deal of friendly correspondence, and I felt that I knew him well, and was terribly shocked when, lying in the hospital recovering from a short illness, news came to me of his tragic death. [Zaner was killed when his automobile was struck by a train, on the night of December 1, 1918.] The whole penmanship world was deeply grieved, for Zaner was a man one had only to know in order to love him, and the better you knew him, the stronger that feeling of affection grew, and he was no fair-weather friend.

Madarasz and Dennis were unrivaled in their special fields, but Zaner could flourish beautifully. His ornamental writing was superb, and more than that he was an artist and painter of no mean skill. The Zaner Text Books, too, were carefully and skillfully put together, and themselves make a creditable monument to the memory of this man who trained so many supervisors for practical work in the field of good writing. There was nothing showy about Zaner. There is nothing showy about most master craftsmen in any profession. The man of high abilities and fine intellect generally realizes how much, even at his best, he lacks of perfection, and is modest in high degree, as was this kindly gentleman, held in affectionate memory by all who knew him.

WILLIAM E. DENNIS (1860-1924)

I was twenty-two years old when I entered the employ of George A. Gaskell, principal and owner of the Bryant & Stratton Business College, Manchester, New Hampshire. I was lean, and long, and thin; so thin I didn't even cast a shadow except on very bright, sunshiny days. I climbed four long, crooked and very dirty flights of stairs to reach the rooms occupied by the school, and as Gaskell showed me into the large schoolroom where I was to be master of ceremonies for the next two years, I saw at a table, folding papers, a couple of young fellows a few years younger than myself. One was the subject of this part of my sketch of 'Three Master Craftsmen.' He wasn't bigger than a 'pint of cider,' to use a New England expression. I thought at first he was only a little boy, but he was nearly my own age. The other, almost as thin as myself, was very different in appearance from the portly A. N. Palmer of today.

From that time in the far-distant past, to the day in June of the present year when Dennis joined the 'great majority,' he had been an intimate friend of mine. I probably knew him as well as anybody gets to know another; and every year and sometimes oftener, as we grew older, we have managed to meet for a talkfest either at his rooms in New York or at mine in Holyoke.

Dennis was born at Derry, New Hampshire, not Manchester, as most of the sketches of him relate. He came in from this little country town a few miles out, to get inspiration from Gaskell, and he got more of it than any other pupil of that brilliant but erratic genius, who didn't give out much inspiration unless he took a liking. Dennis had purchased a Gaskell's Compendium, made remarkable improvement in his already pretty good work, and Gaskell had published his name in the 'Before and After using Advertising' which he was one of the first to use.

Young Bill, as we called him, had just struck his 'stride' when I came to Manchester, and it was \*some\* stride, too. He flourished amazing specimens of all kinds of birds, beasts and creeping things. They were not very finished productions then, not the high art of Henry Spencer or Flickinger, but they had the dash, the life, the vigor and the accuracy of spacing and shading that in later years made Dennis's flourished work supremely good.

I think the youngster would have perished for lack of food and sleep if we others, Gaskell, Palmer and myself had not occasionally pried him out of his chair and sent him out to get food and drink and at night a few hours of sleep. If anybody thinks it is play to become such a workman as Dennis, Madarasz, or Zaner, get the idea out of your system. There are lots of people who are natural penmen, artists, musicians; but you don't become a Dennis, a Meissonier, or a Paderewski without a large amount of downright hard work, and this young fellow did it. He was a marvel of industry in the two years I knew him at the school, and then he went with A. R. Dunton and learned a lot from that rough genius, who had a superb vocabulary of words not found in the dictionary.

Dennis had little education, but he went to the Bryant & Stratton Business College of H. E. Hibbard of Boston, another rough but warmhearted leader in Commercial Education. Then followed an itinerant tour of the country, which, Dennis told me, didn't add to his moral or intellectual standing. He wrote cards. It was an easy matter to pick up five dollars or so in an hour or two, for he could do dashing card work and do it like lightning, and it was just as easy to spend the five dollars in a manner that would not be approved by any Sunday School Superintendent.

He came back East after going as far as the Mississippi in the West, and for a short time he was with Pierce of Philadelphia, where he taught some penmanship classes but was not a howling success as a teacher of penmanship, and Wright of Long Island had him with similar results. Then, a good many years ago, he began business as an engrosser in Brooklyn, where the remaining years of his life were passed in building up a business which at the time of his death was yielding him a very good income.

Dennis, during his first year in Brooklyn, taught some classes in the YMCA and City Night School, which helped him greatly to get a start. He soon attracted the attention of those who wished resolutions engrossed, and he always had, after his work was known, a large and profitable business in filling out diplomas. He worked with amazing rapidity. I never saw anybody who could slash off German Text, Old English,

Church Text, or anything in the engrossing line with the same speed and dash. He could not do the absolutely accurate work of his afterwards partner, Willis Baird, but in off-hand flourishing, bold dashing, all-alive work, neither John D. Williams, the old-time wonder of the Bryant & Stratton Chain of Business Colleges, nor George A. Gaskell, who was the superior of Williams, were in the same class with Dennis.

Every year, after the rush of diploma filling was over, he spent a couple of months, July and August generally, among the hills and vales of his native New England,- and New Hampshire, his birthplace and mine, is the Switzerland of America with beautiful landscape everywhere. He liked to tramp through this region and when he was in the field, postcards flew thick and fast with views of rare beauty. The last time I saw him he was in excellent health, on a tramping tour, and he told me that he expected to live to be anywhere from 96 to 110 years of age, but "you never can tell." I have no doubt that the rush of work which came to him in May and June of this year kept him worked far beyond his strength. He had a habit of working all night when a rush came. He had a splendid helper, Mr. Lowe, a Korean, who also had a habit of working all night when there was a rush, and Lowe died just as Dennis did, after two or three days' illness of pneumonia developing from a cold.

Dennis was a good man to have for a friend in time of need. Many a tramp card writer or itinerant penman found him an oasis in a financial desert.

It was a great shock to me, when somebody in Providence wrote to inform me that Dennis was dead.

Who knows, in the great 'hereafter' hidden from mortal vision, if we may not meet again these 'Three Master Craftsmen' of my sketch.

- By Charles T. Cragin