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CT Cragin on Gaskell

When I graduated from business college I had spent all my money. I had no friends with any influence to get me employment, and I was painfully bashful. People say I have recovered from that fault, if fault it be. But I really did not know, how to get a start. But I could write a decent letter, and I started out to find a job by mail. Among others, I addressed George A. Gaskell, owner of the Bryant and Stratton business college at Manchester, X. H. In course of time I received a letter from him saying that if I would accept a very moderate salary and complete a thorough course of instruction in every branch, of plain and ornamental penmanship. I could act as teacher of bookkeeping, etc., in his school the first of September.

I understood bookkeeping a good deal better than the average business college graduate and I suppose might be called an expert arithmetician; but I could not write worth a cent. I had to hurry too much in my business course to give much attention to it and so I accepted the offer and on the first of September I climbed four of the longest, crookedest and dirtiest flights of stairs I ever encountered in the Old Merchants' Exchange Building at Manchester, and introduced myself to the proprietor.

George A. Gaskell was, at that time, the most widely advertised and best known penman in the United States. Born in Ashtabula, Ohio (actually born in Seneca, NY according to Del Tysdal), he had taken lessons in penmanship of old P. R. Spencer, at his Log Cabin Institute of Pen Art, and, while a mere youth, had become one of the brilliant staff engaged by Bryant and Stratton as teachers in their chain of colleges, which extended from Portland, Maine to New Orleans.

Gaskell had been connected with the New York college, afterwards Packard's and Packard was always interested in the brilliant Ohioian, up to the time of his tragic death in the marshes of Jersey City, for Gaskell was a man of far more than average ability. He had been sent to Manchester, N. H. to take charge of a college located in that city and his fine penmanship attracted the attention of Col. John B. Clarke, editor of the "Manchester Mirror," one of the best known papers in New England. A large attendance at the college was the result, and the death of Stratton breaking up the chain of colleges, Gaskell bought the one at Manchester.

But Gaskell had one serious failing which has been greatly exaggerated in the telling. Sensational stories of his dissipation are common and, like the stories of other well known men, they did not grow less in the telling. He, was not a steady drinker, would go for months without touching a drop of intoxicants, but when the spirit moved, there was something doing, and the outbreaks which followed were dazzling and spectacular and left little to be desired in thoroughness of execution. It is needless to say that the school did not benefit by these occasional exhibitions and at the time I went there it was at a pretty low ebb. I

Gaskell, himself, had long since lost all interest in school matters and merely ran it as a side line to his more profitable Compendium. There are very few penmen now living who have seen half a century of service that did not get their inspiration to begin the art from - the old Gaskell Compendium. !inch men as L. Madarasz, W. E. Dennis, A. N. Palmer, E. C. Mills, A. S. Osborne, F. B. Courtney and scores of other "top notchers" will admit that from the old Compendium they were led to follow the line of work in which they so excel.

Gaskell began the compendium by setting a few copies for outsiders who, interested in penmanship, wished something for home practice. He gave them some hand written slips which were dashing specimens of the old time full arm and finger movement shaded writing made popular by PR Spencer and his followers. He charged \$2.00 for these handwritten copies the demands for them became so large that he finally prepared a set and had them lithographed, put up in an attractive package, tied with pink ribbon and ornamented on the outside of the envelope with a portrait cut of his own striking features, and sold them for a dollar.

But Gaskell was a good deal more than a penman. He was a sharp and intelligent advertiser, and so far as I know, the originator of the "before and after" style of advertising which has since become so popular. He

would get a photograph of some young fellow who had used the compendium and a specimen of his penmanship before be used it and another specimen after he had been using it for a few. months. Gaskell's enemies said that these "after using" specimens were "doctored." One went so far as to say that he knew Gaskell wrote them himself or had some of his star penmen write them. This statement was absurd. The specimens were genuine and the only touching up ever done to them was, perhaps, the strengthening of an occasional line with India ink so that it could be photographed. I have seen scores of them. It was a very effective kind of advertising and resulted in the sale of more than a hundred thousand copies of the compendium.

There were other compendiums published At about the same time, possibly some of the in preceded that of Gaskell, I am inclined to think that the excellent series of copies prepared by H. W. Shaylor, a fine penman of Portland, Maine, still living, preceded that of Gaskell, and A. R. Dunton, the eccentric and brilliant penman of Boston, had a set and so did D. L. Musselman, of Quincy, Ill., and A. H. Hinman of Worcester, all superb pen artists. I have seen nothing of Musselman's work in late years but A. H. Hinman has not forgotten how to astonish the stars of modern penmanship by his dazzling blackboard exhibitions and equally fine pen work.

My sojourn at Eastman's had taught me that business college circulars were inclined to be misleading, and that the equipment and course of study do not, in any case, exceed the printed description. But I have to laugh even now when I think of the "lay out" at Manchester. There were a dozen or more big walnut tables and a bank, or merchants' emporium, or whatever it was called, scattered about a large square room, big enough to hold a hundred students had there been that number. A great monitor stove stood well out in the room and furnished heat. As I took my first look about the room, where perhaps a dozen students, young men and women were about the desks, over in one corner was a table piled with unfolded papers, fresh from the printing press, and a rather tall, very slim, pale faced lad and a rather short, very slim, pale faced lad were folding those papers and glancing sidewise at the new arrival, myself.

I was a rather tall, very slim but not pale faced specimen of humanity myself. I had worked like "blue blazes" all summer in a clearing where we had burned over 50 or 60 acres of land to get rid of the brush. I was so thin that only on very clear days did I cast a shadow and so smoked, and sunburned that I would have passed very nicely for an Indian.

I do not believe Gaskell introduced me to those youngsters, who were perhaps four or five years "my juniors. He seldom did introduce anybody to anybody. Never seemed to think of it. But I soon found out that one was a little chap from Cheater, by the name of WE Dennis. He was always sprawling that W. E. D. on paper and some amazing combinations he made of it. He had the flourishing bug and had it badly. He was, a: sort of protege of Gaskell, as much as anybody ever could be. Gaskell was pleased with the talent the boy had for slinging ink. He was a wonder. Not much bigger than or good sized ink-bottle himself, he had already flourished the bounding stag and the bald headed eagle spreading his wings from pole to pole and the big snake and flocks upon flocks upon flocks of the bob tail and split tail and any old kind of tail birds peculiar to the genus of flourished fowls which exist only in the vivid imagination of the off-hand penman.

Young Palmer, was a resident of Manchester and he, too, had the flourishing bug but not to the violent extent that Dennis had. It was a mild case with him and I think he had already begun to talk muscular movement, but I am not sure about that. He helped about the school, looked after the mailing of the Penman's Gazette, another venture of Gaskell's. Partly because he thought it would be a good advertising medium and partly because he had a little streak of journalism in his make up, he had started the previous year, a Penman's paper that he called the Penman's Gazette. It was the pioneer of the three excellent penmen's papers now published and it had a paid circulation of perhaps two or three hundred copies and a gratuitous circulation of as many more. I think he printed an edition of a thousand, wrapped up a copy with every compendium and hoped to make it pay. It was a somewhat erratic publication came out monthly, generally, but was liable to skip a month on occasion. On the whole it was a very creditable publication for Gaskell had good taste and could write a good article, himself, and there were plenty more who were eager to get into print and express their views on matters and things connected with the Chirographic art.

Dennis and Palmer and myself considered ourselves the editorial staff though about all we ever did was to fold the papers, address the wrappers and lick the postage stamps. I think I contributed one or two alleged humorous articles to the paper about the time of its death, possibly that hastened the event.

Many a good time we had together, Dennis, Palmer and myself in those good old times. We did not have much money, any of us, but we had excellent appetites, an abounding sense of humor and clear consciences, or no consciences, whichever you please. At any rate none of our sins kept us awake nights. There was not much in Palmer to suggest the human dynamo that has since talked muscular movement penmanship, days and nights and Sundays until he has succeeded in making the big city of New York and conservative Boston each it, according to his method, in their public schools, and made his name known in almost every Catholic school in America. A big powerful man, Palmer, today, of bounding vitality and boundless optimism. The big West broadened him. He never would have done much in cramped-up New England. But the prairies gave him room and their breadth inspired him. A good tighter but a' fighter in the open, and a big hearted fellow, is my old time pupil, for I gave Palmer some instruction in bookkeeping, and the like, in those early Manchester days.

Every school boy and business college student knows, at a glance, the dashing, offhand flourishing of that little fellow from Chester, Win. E. Dennis. In avoirdupois he is not nearly as big as Palmer or myself, but no better fellow ever wore out shoe leather. I like to go into his studio in Brooklyn and smoke a cigar with him. He always gives me a cigar out of the box he keeps for people who come in to pay a bill not the box he keeps for casual bores. He does not like to flourish eagles and bounding stags and boa-constrictors any more, and laughs derisively at his early ideas of art in general, and has lately become a full-fledged Sherlock Holmes in the detection of forgery, and other kinds of pen deviltry. Says he likes that kind of business and can tell by a man's hand writing whether he had hard or soft boiled eggs for breakfast, and whether he goes to church on Sunday or plays poker at home for five cent antes. But let us return to our mutton. I am getting a long way from the old Bryant & Stratton College and I have not yet started my story.

The school gradually filled up, though we did not have a large attendance that winter. Gaskell never said anything to me about teaching, so I sailed in and did the best I could. He collected 825.00 in advance, for three months tuition, of every student who showed up and if anybody came in there to make inquiries, and had \$25.00 G.A. enrolled it. He would have that \$25.00 and the boy in at a desk before he knew it. He seemed to fairly hypnotize them. After they got in if they could get anything out of the school all right, he did not hinder them and he did not help them much. Occasionally he set a copy though he soon delegated that to me and I was a pretty poor penman. He used to come in occasionally and hear the Commercial Law class, in an absent minded manner, and if one of the students had told him the "Law of Contracts" required the death penalty in case a document was not sealed, I do not believe he would have noticed the matter in the least. He would have gone on chewing his chin beard which he had a habit of twisting up into his mouth and would have reached up and pulled down his cuff, another habit he had, and gone on with the lesson.

Quite a number of students came to us from all parts of the country, attracted by Gaskell's penmanship. They thought they would obtain superior instruction from him, and it is needless to say, that they were somewhat disappointed, for he never paid any particular attention to them. I do not believe he ever showed Dennis anything about penmanship more than, perhaps to flourish an occasional swan or bird or quill for him and Dennis was his favorite pupil. Strangers with no particular talent got no particular attention.

One fellow from Illinois went at him one day savagely. Told him he was a blank humbug and a fakir and wanted his money back. Gaskell took it with amazing calm. Told him to go back into the room and mind his own business. If he did not he would get kicked out of there; neck and heels. As for getting any money back, he had more chance of being struck by lightning in mid-winter than of that. He afterward came around to me and said in his quiet manner, "That fellow Smith, is a peculiar kind of a man. He does not seem to be quite satisfied." And that was all Smith ever got out of it and he left us before long but he left his \$25.00.