

HER MAJESTY'S MAILS.

BY THE AUTHOR OF "HER MAJESTY'S MINISTERS," ETC.



ER Majesty's mails delivered throughout the United Kingdom last year more letters, post-cards, and book-packets than there were human beings then in the world. The latest estimate of the population of the globe puts the number at one thousand four hundred and fifty-five millions, nine hundred and twenty-three thousand, five hundred; and the Postmaster-General's last report shows that

(not counting newspapers) the correspondence delivered by the British Post-Office within the year reached a grand total of one thousand four hundred and fifty-six millions, four hundred and eighteen thousand, nine hundred. Supposing, therefore, that the postal arrangements of all the countries on the face of the earth had been under the control of the Postmaster-General, he would have had a communication of some sort for every man, woman, and child living, and nearly half a million of them might have had a second letter before all the letter-bags would have been quite empty! Taking together the correspondence of all kinds, including newspapers, the number was actually one thousand five hundred and eighty-six millions, nine hundred and thirty-seven thousand, three hundred; so that if this vast mass of letters, and post-cards, and books, and newspapers had been equally divided among all the inhabitants of Great Britain and Ireland, everybody would have received about forty-six communications during the year.

We have made these calculations for the sake of *helping* our readers to understand what an enormous amount of work is got through in the British Post-Office in one year, but of course it is utterly impossible for any human mind to form an adequate conception of the greatness of the work. It is easy enough to set down the figures and *talk* about the 1,127,997,500 letters, the 114,458,400 post-cards, the 213,963,000 book-packets and circulars, and the 130,518,400 newspapers that passed through the Post-Office within twelve months, but it is quite another matter to endeavour to realise what these figures involve. Let any one just follow in thought the successive steps taken by every letter, from the time it is dropped into the letter-box or pillar-post, to the time it is delivered to the person addressed, and then consider that the same process is gone through as regards every single

communication of all these 1,586,000,000, and he will begin to wonder how it can be possible for such a prodigious task to be accomplished as it is in such a wonderfully perfect manner. Clearly, the work could not be done at all without organisation of the most complete kind; and it may be said without fear of contradiction that the British Post-Office is not only the most gigantic establishment in the world, but it is the most elaborately organised. It makes comparatively little use of machinery, and yet it does its work with all the regularity and precision of the most ingeniously constructed machine. It employs (in the postal department) about 35,000 officers of all grades, and every man in the great army has his work to do at a certain hour every day and in a certain way, and he does it. There is rarely any failure: the vast human machine but seldom "goes wrong," so nicely are all its parts adjusted, so systematically are all its manifold operations directed by those who are responsible for its proper working.

It is well known, of course, that the plans upon which the Post-Office is worked are not the product of any one mind. The Post-Office is a growth—a very marvellous growth, too; and many busy brains have been employed in developing the system and bringing it to its present all but faultless state.

Sir Rowland Hill's great idea of a uniform "penny postage," as soon as it was adopted, necessitated great changes in the mode of carrying on the business of the Post-Office, as, instead of 82½ millions, it had 169 millions of letters to deliver during the first year of "penny postage." All these changes were worked out by him to their utmost details with an amount of patience, forethought, and perseverance which few can fully appreciate, but which all must admire.

There were postal reformers, however, before Rowland Hill, who effected improvements in the conveyance of Her Majesty's mails, without which even his great schemes must have proved comparative failures. There was Ralph Allen, immortalised by Pope in the lines—

"Let humble Allen, with an awkward shame,
Do good by stealth, and blush to find it fame."

He was the originator of the system of cross-posts between Exeter and Chester, going by way of Bristol, Gloucester, and Worcester, thus connecting the West of England with the Lancashire districts. The Government gave him a lease of the cross-posts for life, at a fixed rental of £6,000 per year. The service was from time to time extended, much to the public advantage, and not a little to Allen's benefit too, he himself estimating the net profits of his contract at £10,000 a year. At his death therefore, in 1764, the Post-Office found cross-posts established in all parts of the country, the whole of which were then brought

under the control of the Postmaster-General. It may be said, in passing, that Allen made generous use of his wealth, as he spent a large part of his income in supporting and encouraging deserving literary men.

More than half a century before the days of "penny postage," a great improvement was effected in the working of the mails by the establishment of what were long known and widely famed as Palmer's mail-coaches. Palmer's scheme was the substitution of mail-coaches for the solitary "mail-cart" or "post-horse" upon which the Department had hitherto relied for the conveyance of letters. The advantages of sending the mails by coaches which would also convey passengers, and would besides be well guarded, were obvious; and Pitt, to whom the scheme was submitted, having sanctioned it, Palmer was forthwith installed as Controller-General of the Mails. The rates of postage were slightly raised, but the number of letters rapidly increased, owing to the greater safety, regularity, and speed which Palmer's mail-coaches insured, and many of the principal towns petitioned the authorities to establish mail-coaches in their districts.

Palmer's plans were so successful that the revenue of the Post-Office rose in twenty years from a quarter of a million to a million and a half; the mails not only travelled more quickly, but were greatly increased in number: 380 towns which had formerly only three deliveries a week, had a daily delivery before the end of the century. In 1836 there were fifty-four four-horse mail-coaches running in England, but although some use had been made of the then existing railways, it was not until the years 1838 and 1839 that Acts of Parliament were passed to provide for the conveyance of the mails by the railway companies. Since that date the Post-Office has used the railway system of the country to the fullest possible extent, but the "missing links" of connections between many towns and villages are still supplied by means of mail-carts and coaches.

The sweeping changes proposed by Sir Rowland (then Mr.) Hill were stoutly resisted by the Post-Office authorities. Colonel Maberley, who had just been appointed Secretary to the Post-Office, not only predicted that if the penny rate were adopted the revenue of the Department would not recover itself within forty or fifty years, but openly declared that the whole scheme was an absurdity and an impossibility. Fortunately the Government of that day was more enterprising than some of its own servants, and had as great a contempt for impossibilities as had the great Pitt when he was told his orders could not be executed because they were impossible. Returning the orders to the messenger, he exclaimed, "Tell your chief that these orders are given by one who treads upon impossibilities." In this spirit the Lords of the Treasury sanctioned the new scheme, and it was immediately brought into operation. For a few months the metropolis alone had the benefit of the reduction, but at the beginning of 1840 a penny postage for the whole of Great Britain and Ireland became an established fact. The immediate result of the changes introduced was an enormous increase in the amount of correspondence, but for some years there was an actual deficit

in the revenues of the Post-Office. Sir Rowland Hill anticipated that *ultimately* the net revenue would recover itself within £300,000 of the amount realised by the higher rates which had hitherto prevailed, and that his system would produce a five-fold increase of letters. We have already shown how far his expectations have been surpassed as to the increase in the number of letters; and as to the financial results, it will be seen that even he was not so sanguine as he might have been, when we state that last year the gross revenue of the Post-Office (reckoning postage and money-order commission only) was £6,300,730, as against £2,346,000 in 1839, and that the net revenue (or profit) was £2,497,687, as against £1,660,000 in the last year of the old system. Comparing the two years 1839 and 1879, it appears that the Post-Office delivered in the latter year nearly eighteen times the number of letters, &c., that it delivered forty years ago, and though the postage is less than one-ninth of the average charge then made, the national exchequer is richer by £800,000 per annum.

According to the latest returns, the number of post-offices open in the United Kingdom on the 31st of March, 1880, was 14,212, of which 912 were head offices and 13,300 sub-offices. Besides these, there were 12,541 letter-boxes and pillar-posts in streets, roads, &c., making a total of 26,753 places at which letters may be posted, 2,012 of these places being in London. The staff of the Post-Office (not reckoning those engaged exclusively on telegraph duties) consists of 13,882 postmasters, 3,803 clerks, 16,883 letter-carriers, sorters, &c., 28 mail-guards and porters, besides the secretaries and superior officers, who number 44, and the Postmaster-General. The service of the three kingdoms is managed—of course, under the direction of the Postmaster-General and the Secretary—in their respective capitals, at each of which there is a chief office, with a secretarial and other departmental staffs; and the working arrangements of each office are the same, on a smaller scale, as those adopted at the General Post-Office in London.

Of the several Departments into which the Office is divided, one of the most important, undoubtedly, is the Mail-Office, which deals with all matters relating to the transmission of the mails. There are 617 mails daily between London and other post-towns in England and Wales; 250 towns have two mails from London daily, 162 towns have three, 96 have four, 63 have five, and 20 towns have actually six mails every day. The work of making up and forwarding these mails is done as follows:—After all letters received at the General Post-Office have been placed address uppermost and stamped, they are sorted into twenty great divisions, letters intended for a particular series of roads forming one division; they are then classified according to separate roads or districts, and finally according to different post-towns. The bags are then made up and sealed, and at the appointed time they are conveyed by mail-carts and omnibuses to the railway stations, where they are taken charge of by the officers of the

Travelling Post-Office. The railway mail-coach is literally a post-office on wheels. It is a large commodious vehicle, well lighted and ventilated (well padded, too, in case of accident), and fitted with counters, pigeon-holes, and, indeed, every possible contrivance that can facilitate the business to be done. This business consists of receiving letter-bags from all the towns through which the train passes, emptying them, and dealing with their contents precisely as they would be dealt with at a town post-office—*i.e.*, the letters are sorted and placed in divisions, then in "towns," and finally made up in fresh bags, ready to be given out as the several towns are reached. Mail-trains make few stoppages; when they do, great heaps of bags are quickly turned out of the van, and other heaps taken in; the train moves on again, the work of sorting begins afresh, and new bags are made up. Many of the bags are given out and taken up without stopping the train at all. This is done by means of an ingenious contrivance called the bag-net or pouch apparatus. Letter-bags are suspended from a cross-post fixed close to the line, and these bags are caught up by a rod projected from the van as the train whizzes past, while at the same instant the bags to be left are caught off the van-side by a projecting iron arm fixed in the cross-post, and dropped into a bag-net underneath, from which they are taken by a post-office collector. This wonderful piece of mechanism does its work so well that it is a very rare occurrence indeed for any cross-post to be passed without the bags being safely exchanged exactly as they should be. The Railway Post-Office makes up bags for upwards of fifty towns, and takes up by the day mail and the night mail together more than 500 bags of letters.

Most of the letters for London are sorted in the

Travelling Post-Office, and are made up in bags for the different London district offices; and on arrival the bags are forwarded direct to the head office of each district, to be there sorted ready for delivery by the letter-carriers. The business of delivering the morning mail at the General Post-Office commences every morning at six o'clock, at which time upwards of a thousand bags have to be dealt with. This work is done with astonishing expedition, an expert clerk being able to open a bag and check the account of its contents in about a minute and a half. The manner in which the letters are sorted and prepared for delivery, either at the private letter-boxes or by the letter-carriers, is too well known to need description here.

All correspondence for Ireland is sent in bags direct to Holyhead, where they are taken on board a steamer which is fitted up as a floating post-office. A staff of clerks is in readiness to empty the bags and sort the contents during the run across the channel, so that on arrival at Kingstown the bags are ready to be forwarded by rail to all the principal towns. This special Irish service costs the Post-Office £85,900 per annum; the "contract time" for the whole journey of 330 miles (sixty-three miles of which are by water) is eleven hours only, a penalty of 34s. per minute being incurred if this time is exceeded. A service of a novel kind has recently been established on the Clyde by placing a post-office on board the *Columba* steam-vessel, which plies between Greenock and Ardrishaig. In this vessel all the ordinary work of a post-office, excepting money order business, is performed; even messages for transmission by telegraph are received on board and despatched at each place at which the vessel calls.

J. T. G.

WHAT TO WEAR.

CHIT-CHAT ON DRESS. BY OUR PARIS CORRESPONDENT.

THERE is quite a revolution in dress-making. The waists of bodices are short—certainly in the front—and the change is not a becoming one, for there is generally a wide waist-band formed of cross-cut folds, which thickens the waist. Below the waist several of the new skirts are gathered to a depth of half a yard, and then comes a scarf tunic; indeed, many have the entire front gathered, and it is scarcely possible to introduce too many gatherings in any dress to be quite in the fashion. These gaugings appear on the trimmings, on the sleeves, and also on the collar-piece now so fashionable. Frillings are going out, and box-plaitings have taken their place where plaitings are worn at all; but box-plaited and kilt-plaited flounces or bouillonés are newer. These have the upper edge plaited, the lower one gathered; and in stripes great pains are taken to prevent the colour being hidden, and to show the stripes with regularity. Unfortunately these puffs or bouilloné flounces soon get out of order.

Short skirts are *de rigueur* for daily wear, but long trains, well supported by a balayouse, for evening and full dress. Much gold braid and gold embroidery are applied to dresses; but steel is the particular fashion, and steel and jet, and steel passementerie alone. Steel run net, steel fringes, and steel laces find their place on the best dresses; and some of the richest evening dresses have black net over-skirts embroidered with steel bugles. Large upstanding ruffs, worked in silk, steel, or gold, are also worn and supported by wire—these are mostly for dinner dresses.

Fewer seams are introduced on the bodices; and for young figures many are cut on the cross so that there is no seam on the shoulders. The sleeves are tight, and the bodices themselves much trimmed about the throat, or in draperies about the bodice. Long coat bodices are by no means gone out, and generally when the bodice is short in front there is a deep basque at the back.

Black will be fashionable all the summer; but the flounces, plaitings, puffings, and bows are lined with