

A DAY IN THE RAILWAY CLEARING HOUSE.



It is probable that out of the many thousands who daily pass from one part of the country to another, or forward consignments of merchandise to distant towns, comparatively few have any definite ideas respecting the means used to make the long journey as free from changes as possible, and as little

troublesome as circumstances will allow.

Those who remember the early days of railway travelling, the frequent changes from one train to another, the booking and re-booking consequent upon changing from one company's system to another, so that a traveller from London to the North of England was compelled to take at least three tickets, will readily admit that a great improvement has taken place during the last forty years.

This improvement is the result of the operations of the Railway Clearing House. All dealings between two or more companies are (with a few trifling exceptions) finally settled by this important establishment. Within its walls meetings are held almost daily, at which great officials and distinguished railway magnates decide questions concerning traffic arrangements and other matters.

In the present paper I propose to show (1) what the functions of the Railway Clearing House are, and (2) how those functions are performed. In order to make the subject as interesting as I can, I will not attempt an exhaustive dissertation, but invite my reader to spend "a day in the Railway Clearing House" with me.

The office is a vast block of brick buildings (without the slightest pretension to architectural beauty) situated in Seymour Street, Euston Square. The hours of business are from nine a.m. to five p.m. Accordingly we meet in front of the main building punctually at nine, and watch the clerks as they pour into the office. Presently the hurried step breaks into a sharp trot, for only two minutes' grace is allowed. Just as the inner doors are about to be closed, a hansom cab dashes up, and, ere the driver can stop his over-heated horse, the "fare" has leaped from the vehicle and passed the barrier. Late attendance is a very serious offence in this establishment, affecting not only the annual holidays but also promotion.

Within we find the great building divided into rooms, capable of accommodating from forty to one hundred men. The long desks are covered with formidable piles of documents; all is activity, but not

confusion. Each man has his own allotment of work, for which he is responsible. If the day's work be not completed by five o'clock, the backward clerk is permitted to work after that hour until he has finished.

The Clearing House is divided into three great departments, viz., "Merchandise," "Mileage," and "Coaching;" each department being subdivided into divisions consisting of about thirty-five to fifty men.

As the Merchandise is the chief department we will take that first. Here the monthly receipts earned by the conveyance of goods, mineral products, and cattle, from one company's line to another, are divided among the companies interested. The data upon which such division is made are supplied by the companies forwarding and receiving the goods. To make this point quite clear, let us inspect this packet of papers neatly docketed "From Great Northern to Scotch Companies." Our eye falls upon the monthly account rendered by Boston, from which we learn that two tons of manufactured goods were sent to Dunkeld on the Highland Railway, for which the sum of £5 was prepaid. But we must not assume that the Boston agent has correctly certified this business, so we refer to the Dunkeld statement of traffic received. A comparison of the two documents shows that the Boston clerk is right in his figures. Now for the division of the money among the four companies interested in the carriage of the goods. First, the terminal stations are credited with what are called "terminal allowances" for services performed at Boston and Dunkeld. This allowance is calculated at 4s. per ton in the case before us. (On grain, manufactured iron, and timber, the allowance for terminal services is generally 1s. 6d. per ton; on mineral products, 9d.) Subtracting the 16s. from the amount paid, we have £4 4s. to divide between the Great Northern, North-Eastern, North British, and Highland Railways. This division is based upon the distance, each company receiving a proportion in the ratio of the number of miles travelled over its system. The Great Northern Company, having received the total money, is debited with the proportions received by the remaining three companies. Finally, each company's accounts must be carefully tabulated and summarised, showing the result of the month's traffic between every pair of stations, and these statements forwarded to the audit offices of the companies in question.

Now in the case we have taken by way of illustration, we have supposed that the goods travelled *viâ* York, Berwick, and Perth, but they might possibly have been sent *viâ* the Midland and Caledonian route, not to mention several other courses that were open. How shall we determine beyond doubt the precise route? In answer to this question we are directed to the Mileage department, situated in a distant part of the office. Here we find some 300

clerks actively employed, and we are informed that 500 agents belonging to this department are scattered over the kingdom, discharging the duties of "number-takers." We quickly discover the clerk who deals with the route pursued by Great Northern trains on their way to the far North. To him we state our business. A consignment of goods left Boston for Dunkeld on a certain date; the number of the waggon in which the goods were packed at Boston is 00214. (The waggon-number is entered by the Boston clerk on his return of traffic.) The "mileage" clerk, without hesitation, seizes a great manuscript volume literally black with figures; in a moment his practised eye has caught the number we have mentioned, and the answer to our query comes promptly, "*Vid* York, Berwick, and Perth."

There is no doubt about the matter, no "thinking," our clerk is *sure*. But we are inquisitive, and the clerk is courteous, so we learn that the great volume to which he has just referred is compiled from information supplied by the number-takers and the clerks at the junctions of the various lines.

Each waggon has a number and the initials of the owning company painted on its sides; these must be taken down, with the date, the forwarding station, route, and destination, with description of the traffic. This information is forwarded to the Clearing House. A similar statement is also sent from the receiving station. From these data the mileage clerk has compiled his formidable volumes; and so admirably are these volumes prepared, that the exact route travelled by any waggon is easily determined. But now another question suggests itself, viz., how is the Great Northern Company compensated for the use of the waggon, the engine, and the tarpaulings; for the number-takers at York, Berwick, and Perth have certified that the goods passed their respective stations by means of Great Northern rolling stock? This important business, we find, is dealt with by the mileage clerk, in accordance with the regulations drawn up and agreed to by the various companies.

Sometimes it happens that companies detain the waggons, &c., belonging to other companies, beyond the time agreed upon. Such detention entitles the owning company to a certain compensation. This compensation is known, technically, as a "demurrage account."

But whilst we have been going round the Merchandise and Mileage departments, the morning has slipped away. It is nearly half-past twelve, the hour at which the 700 or 800 merchandise clerks dine, and as we are curious to know how so large a body of men are provided for, we adjourn to the great dining-hall, and take up a position in a quiet corner. About twenty great tables are ranged in two rows; at each table a president is carving the joint provided for his company, and, with the exception of the servants and ourselves, these gentlemen are the only occupants of the room, for it wants a few minutes yet to the half-hour. Presently a tall, heavy-looking youth appears at the entrance-door; he is the precursor of the coming army. A minute more and they pour into the hall, in

a long and almost interminable stream. The time allowed for dinner is only half an hour, so conversation for the most part is brief and disconnected. At 1.45 the smaller departments dine in the same room.

Leaving the dining-hall we turn to the "Coaching" department. Here all traffic conveyed by passenger trains is dealt with. Parcels are treated differently to heavy goods in the matter of terminal allowances. In the latter case (as we have already seen) the weight decides the amount; whereas, with parcels, the number of packages is the chief factor in the calculation of these allowances.

The "Passenger" section of this department is one of great importance, dealing with the receipts arising upon the vast passenger traffic of this travelling age.

With comparatively few exceptions the cash for passengers is paid at the starting-point, on receipt of the ticket. The exceptions are voters travelling to record their votes, and persons travelling at the cost of the Government (such as police officers, soldiers, &c.). This general practice of pre-payment, of course, facilitates the Clearing House operations.

To each booking-clerk is issued a certain number of printed tickets, arranged in numerical order. Every month the booking-clerk makes a return to the Clearing House, showing the stations to which he has booked the number of tickets of each class sold, with the "progressive" numbers carefully stated. If he has had occasion to cut a ticket in half for a child, he must send the unsold portion to the Railway Clearing House, in order to avoid being debited with the full value of the ticket. In addition to the above details, the station return must show the amounts due to other companies interested in the traffic.

The Clearing House then proceeds to deal with the amounts due to companies other than the one booking the passengers.

After registration, these station returns are compared with those of the previous month, in order to check the continuity of the ticket numbers, for the first ticket sold on the 1st of November must follow the last sold on the 31st of October. Then the calculations of the proportions due to intermediate and final companies are checked. When the station accounts are balanced, the Clearing House statement of receipts and earnings is made out and forwarded to the company for whom it has been compiled. This return shows the progressive numbers of tickets sold, halved, or spoilt, and the amount due on each class of tickets separately. In this department the tickets that have been used by passengers are examined, and used as a check upon the booking-clerks. If tickets are found to have been issued, but not accounted for, or accounted for to the wrong station, the matter is set right and the station clerk advised.

The route of passengers is decided by the "nipping" at the junctions. The nippers have dies to impress the number corresponding to the junction and route.

The "Lost Luggage" department is one that possesses great attractions for us, owing to our tendency to lose umbrellas and other portable property. This

department receives daily from each station a list of luggage found, with full description. With this return is also sent from the company a statement of inquiries made by passengers. The Clearing House is thus able to insure the return to its rightful owner of nearly every article found in trains or stations, and the importance and usefulness of the Lost Luggage department may be estimated by the fact that between 300,000 and 400,000 articles are reported as lost in a single year.

We find that there are various societies and clubs in connection with the office, of which time will not permit us to speak at length, as the hour of five

is at hand. But before taking leave of this great hive of industry, we cannot forbear expressing our admiration of the wonderful order that prevails in all the departments. The exactness with which the vast receipts are divided is marvellous, upwards of £15,000,000 being annually dealt with, and balanced to a penny.

Outside we pause for a few minutes to gaze at the crowds of men who pour from the three great vomitories of the building; then we turn our steps towards home, with the reflection that the effectiveness of our railway system is owing in no small measure to the Railway Clearing House.

Some Literary Queries for Spare Moments.

1. Who called himself the first man of his century, and why?
2. What was the badge of the city of Athens?
3. Who wrote "The world knows nothing of its greatest men"?
4. Who was the first English writer of blank verse?
5. On what superstition is the "Ancient Mariner" founded, and what Christian lesson does it teach?
6. Which of Dickens' books is supposed to contain most of the history of his own life?
7. Who was Outalissi?

ANSWERS TO QUERIES ON PAGE 58.

1. Because it originally sat in the vestry of the church of St. Mary-le-Bow, famous for its Norman pillars with arches above.
2. The Mohammedan equivalent for a Crusade—*i.e.*, a Holy War *against* Christianity.
3. Sir Philip Sidney. It was a poetical version of his name, used by him and of him.
4. Fashion (*Much Ado*, Act iii., Sc. 3).
5. Toussaint l'Ouverture.
6. In Gray's "Ode on the Death of a favourite Cat, drowned in a Bowl of Gold-fishes."

DOWN IN THE WORLD.

By the Author of "But for Ilion," "How Vickerscroft was Redeemed," &c. &c.

CHAPTER THE SEVENTH. A DOUBLE CALAMITY.



HE Brands had been more than three months at Clematis Villa, blazing, scorching summer months, which seemed to parch and wither poor Mrs. Brand, just as the heat parched and withered the flowers in Captain Laffin's front garden. The sun beat down fiercely all day on the little grey house,

and there was no corner of it that was not penetrated by the fierce oppressive heat. Nell and Doris made all the shade they could, and courted every stray breath of air for their mother, but she seemed to grow weaker every day. She never complained, and was always cheerful and hopeful, but for all that they saw that the anxiety and the dreadful heat were

telling on her. For though nearly four months had elapsed since Mr. Brand sailed for China, they had not yet received a letter from him, and he had promised to write on every possible occasion. It was well that they had entrusted the management of the auction to Davy, and the selection of the furniture, for what remained, owing to his judicious arrangement, fetched a considerable sum of money, and Nell was able to supply her mother with many little comforts which would have been otherwise impossible. She was fortunate enough, too, to secure two music pupils, and what they paid her, though little enough, was a help. They were Captain Laffin's nieces, and lived at Brompton, a long way from Maitland Street, still Nell went cheerfully three mornings a week, walking home when the weather was not too hot to save the fare. She enjoyed the walk too, and an occasional peep into the shop-windows, and liked to watch the busy hurrying tide of life that ebbed and flowed past her. They were all utter strangers, those restless mortals that passed unceasingly to and fro, and more than once she wondered if she would ever recognise a face, or see any single creature she knew in any of the busy streets and thoroughfares. Almost while the thought was in her mind she found herself one day face to face with Alec Fraser. She could not help the quick glad flush, the sudden light in her