

CATCHING THE POST.

BY THOMAS ARCHER.

PERHAPS it seldom occurs to many of us when we wake in the night, that millions of happy thoughts, millions of sad reminders, millions of requests, millions of threats, millions of congratulations, millions of questions, millions of answers, are flying from London to various parts of the world—from various parts of the world to London, through rain, hail, snow, wind, tempest, fierce tropical heat, balmy summer airs, cold, pale moonlight, sultry storm-lowering weather; on board mail-packets; in native boats; in bullock waggons; on mule packs; in mail trains on long lines of railway, where the line of carriages rushes past some lonely outlying country station with a scream, a whirr, and a whiz, like a dreadful monster leaving behind a trail of fiery breath. In many out-of-the-way places in England, night has scarcely given way to morning before mail carts or coaches are got ready to carry the bags that have been thrown out on the platform of some remote station for distribution in an agricultural district. All night long the messages of hope, fear, love, truth, hate, reproof, exhortation, good and evil counsel, are winging their way to meet the waking world to-morrow, that they may be translated into action.

Probably it is some vague impression of this sort which gives a subtle fascination to one of the most remarkable sights in London—a sight which may be witnessed every evening for about ten minutes before the loag and the short hands of the big clock-face at the Post-office, St. Martin's-le-Grand, form a vertical line exactly bisecting the arc between the VI. and the XII.: a sight at which even the jaded man of business, who (man and boy) has seen it five or six nights a week for twenty or thirty years, pauses for a few moments that he may chuckle over its humours or speculate upon its marvellous significance. For at a few minutes before six o'clock the broad steps before the chief office are occupied by a throng of persons all struggling towards the great open mouth of the box which receives letters for despatch by the inland night mails to places in Great Britain and Ireland. A late-letter-box is afterwards opened till seven o'clock for letters bearing an extra halfpenny stamp, but it may easily be supposed that the saving of the extra postage is worth a struggle to people who send out a large number of letters; and "to catch the night's post" is often an arduous and difficult undertaking, not achieved without some personal inconvenience. It may be owing to some depravity of our nature that these inconveniences, and the general sense of competitive activity pervading the scene on that not too well lighted area, constitute the chief part of the interest to an otherwise unconcerned spectator, who, having safely committed his own letters to the box in good time, and heard them rustle downwards to the cavernous depths below, can calmly contemplate the breathless efforts of others, or

speculate with mild excitement upon the chances of some last-comer being just too late. Not that there is a lack of good-fellowship even among the panting eager throng who have contrived to get a front place.

Little Bob Shorter, who has run as hard as he can pelt, without his jacket, from a printing office, carrying a square basketful of letters before him as though they were hot pastry, will get a lift from the grim-faced man, also without a jacket, from the packer's in Gresham Street.

"Now then, young un," he of the grim visage calls out as Bob gives him an awkward push with the corner of the basket, "you ain't half on the job. Let's get your lot in for you"—a friendly interposition which a little checks the ardour of an aggressive youth in a Scotch cap, who has come up at a canter and charged headlong at the box, to the discomfiture of a lad who, having stationed himself with a bushel or so of missives sent out by an advertising firm, stands rather an ugly chance of finding himself rolled over into the black shadow beneath the box. There are flying detachments of boys coming and going here, and many of them bring huge consignments of letters; for there are firms in the City who make it a part of their business to address letters and circulars by the thousand, and to take the responsibility of posting them within a given time. The boys, however, are not the most remarkable of the messengers who come to catch the post. There are foreign correspondents who have had a run for it to get here in time for the box which receives letters for the foreign mails: burly, easy-going Germans; quick Italians; wiry, black-bearded Greeks. Nor are some painfully suggestive elements wanting; for in more than one strongly-marked and striking countenance may be read the story of "better days;" when, instead of the loosely-tied collarless scarf, and the evidently "second-hand" coat, and shabby hat, the wearer was a spruce young clerk, with glossy hat, and neatly-fitting raiment; painful stories of misfortune to be seen in some countenances; in others a worse narrative still, the record of the tavern, the billiard-room, the betting office, the degrading and ruinous-influence of the "bar," and its sordid extravagance of drink.

It needs but a glance in other faces to note that the very act of sending off a letter has brought about a train of thought which is almost a reverie even in this crowded place; thought already miles and miles away, in remote hamlet or busy manufacturing town or foreign sea-port—thought allied to anxious hope that the message, with its enclosure, may reach its destination in time to prevent suffering, to avert disgrace, to give cheer, to renew effort. One can scarcely help wondering what the smiling policeman thinks of it all; whether he ever philosophises on human nature in the aspect of "catching the post." His official services are not in much request, but he stands here as the repre-

sentative of order, and occasionally interposes to make room for some timid, feeble, or unaccustomed hand to reach the box and gently drop its contribution into the gaping mouth. If the two young ladies who are somewhat wistfully contemplating the tussle just now going on there do not seek his aid, or that of Bob Shorter, they will miss the post, and be at the expense of a halfpenny a-piece for extra stamps. But their attitude is too calm for such a supposition; the feminine mind would but rarely be able to contemplate without more emotion the probability of such a loss. Their letters were posted a quarter of an hour ago: they are now looking on with amused wonder that there should be so many people in a hurry—that there can be so many things to write about of sufficient importance to make the rush for the six o'clock post so much like a "scrimmage" at football. It will be well for them to move aside presently, for the long hand of the dial is more than half-way between eleven and twelve, and already there is a sound of rapid feet—a sound of labouring breath; the latest incursion of post-catchers is already at the foot of the steps. The elderly lady, who has mistaken the General Post Office for the Mansion House, and wants "a bus for Pimlico," had better pause for a minute, unless the gallantry of the nice-spoken foreign gentleman, who can't make her understand that she must "return herself to Sheepside," leads him to pilot her safely across that dangerous and somewhat slippery asphalt at the junction of thoroughfares by St. Paul's.

Soon after the crowd at the letter-box has dispersed—almost as soon as the elderly lady has succeeded in reaching Pimlico, all the letters that have been tossed into the yawning cavity will have been sorted—for in the great building here hundreds of sharp eyes and quick hands are at work. By the time the late-letter-box has received its last contingent the chief branch and district offices in London have yielded theirs, and here at the stone platform at St. Martin's-le-Grand are a file of Post Office vans, drawn up ready to receive the large sealed bags containing the letters sorted for the main lines of railway by which they are to reach their destination. These bags come sliding down a smooth wooden shoot or inclined plane, and are at once taken possession of by the officials who are to convey them to the various stations. There is very little delay now. To Euston Square, a whole line of vans are already on their way, for the Northern and Midland mail trains; and for other stations the rest are now starting. When they arrive the bags will be taken therefrom by Post Office officials on the spot, carried to the postal carriages, the sorting carriages and tenders, or mail-bag vans. The first sorting at the Post Office has given the main or

divisional direction to these letters, the special sorting will be carried on from the moment the train leaves the station. In one of the sorting carriages—which is a large travelling-room fitted with green-baize-covered counters, with pigeon-holes, and rows of pegs on which to hang the bags intended for the towns the names of which are inscribed above the pegs—the bags of cross-post letters are received and prepared for their proper delivery. These letters are received, sorted, and sometimes made up and despatched without stoppage of the train.

The letters for some small town and its adjacent villages, say, are placed together, and sealed up in a crinkly, dingy white skin bag, which is strapped within a stout brown cover. The guard, who knows every point of the journey, is aware that he is approaching a station—slides down the shutter of the window-hole, pushes back the door in its side groove, reaches out of the window for an iron hinged bar, which he pulls inside, that he may fasten the bag to the end by a kind of clip or spring. He then swings it out, where it hangs over the rails. He then returns to the window, and releases another contrivance, which is in effect a receiving basket or net. The train is going at what seems like a mile a minute—clatters, rumbles, passes a brilliant flash, and is again careering through fields, and over bridges and viaducts. It has passed a postal station, where, by some simple mechanism, the post bag for that district has been detached from the iron arm, and drops into a net or basket ready to receive it; while the net from the carriage window has passed beneath the bags of letters suspended at the station, and has gathered them to tumble them into the postal carriage, where they are instantly seized upon, opened, and their contents sorted by the clerks, to be consigned to the respective bags which will deliver them at the next station, from which they will be sent to their proper destination. Quick as the operations are, the train is half a mile beyond the postal station before the guard has drawn in the net and the bags are opened. Then the sorters go to work with a will. And so along the main arteries of the great railway lines—even where there is no pause between the pulse-beats—the work goes on of sending back and forward, or on either side, through other arteries or veins, the life-blood of a nation's correspondence.

Twelve hundred and eighty millions of letters represent the last year's circulation, that is to say, four millions a day, and as many as four hundred thousand circulars have been posted at a time by one firm in London. The persons permanently employed in the work of carrying on this gigantic system of communication number 44,600, and 41,000 more are partially employed.

