

a secret from every one, and especially from Mr. Aston. Some day, perhaps, you may wear it openly.

"And now I must close this long letter. I shall look eagerly for a long letter from you, my dear Mary, by the next packet, and should be more anxious than I am, had I not heard, through Mr. Aston's last letter to his children, that you were in good health.

"Please give my kind regards to him, and all other friends at St. David, and to good old Mrs. Margaret, when you write; and meanwhile, till I write again, believe me, my dear Mary, ever

"Your affectionate brother,
"HENRY."

It will be remarked that Henry Talbot did not once allude to the name of Morton in the above letter, but spoke of his new friends as Henry and Mary, the children of Mr. Aston. If he had any suspicion of their relationship to himself and his sister, he kept those suspicions secret.

The fact really was, that before he disclosed anything he suspected, to them or to his sister, he wished to learn from Mary's reply, whether Mr. Aston had made any disclosures to her. If he had not, he held himself bound in honour not to betray the secret he had accidentally discovered, without Mr. Aston's permission. He had, however, no doubt in his own mind that the *soi-disant* Mr. Aston was his long-lost uncle Henry Morton, and that his youthful hosts at Watertown were his cousins.

CHAPTER XXXIV.—MARY TALBOT AT HOME.

WHEN the intelligence of Mary Talbot's relationship to Mr. Aston (who, for reasons known to the rector alone, still chose to retain his assumed name) became known throughout the village, great astonishment was manifested. She was generally congratulated upon the discovery of an uncle who was not only able but anxious to befriend her; and though Mr. Sinclair and his niece at first contemplated with some anxiety the probability that the discovery would lead to her resignation of the situation she held, and in which she had rendered herself necessary and almost invaluable to them, their minds were soon set at ease by the young lady herself, who declared that it was alike her own and her uncle's wish that, for the present at least, she should continue to perform her customary routine of duties.

"It is some consolation to me to find that I am not utterly alone in the world," she observed one day, soon after the discovery, to Miss Wardour; "and though this knowledge cannot compensate me for the loss of my only brother, I try to be—I am, thankful to Him who, in the midst of my sore trials, has given me so many kind and sympathising friends; but Henry and I were all in all to each other."

"It is hard to suffer these trials, dear Mary," said Miss Wardour. "Still, we must try to believe that though the ways of Providence are inscrutable, everything is ordained for the best."

"I cannot, I cannot," cried Mary. "It is vain to urge me," and she gave way to a burst of grief that she was unable to restrain.

Miss Wardour made no effort to restrain the sorrowing girl's tears. She felt that there are times when any attempt at consolation is resisted as an intrusion by those who are suffering from the first smart of a sore affliction, and in a few minutes Mary became more composed.

"Forgive me, dear Miss Wardour," she said, taking her friend's hand, "and may Heaven pardon me. It is wrong, I feel and know it is wrong, to doubt the wisdom

and goodness of Providence. I hope the day may come when I shall be able to say, 'All is well;' but I cannot now—I cannot indeed. Do not urge me. You only make me feel my loss more keenly. Leave me to my own thoughts, and I will strive, I will pray for submission. But let that be between me and Him who has seen fit to try me so severely."

"You will not remain here now, I presume," said Miss Wardour, after there had been a few minutes silence. "I do not mean that you will leave us. I am aware that you and your uncle have arranged that you are to remain with us. But you must feel lonesome here by yourself in the farmhouse. It was but a week ago that my uncle and I were talking on that subject, and we almost decided to offer you a room at the Rectory. Now, however, I suppose you will go to reside with your uncle."

"No," replied Mary; "I have never felt lonesome here. My uncle does wish me to remove to Cliff Cottage; but I have decided to remain here, where Henry and I spent our last hours together.

"Once—but a little while ago," she went on, "I did think of leaving St. David altogether. I had reasons. Perhaps some day I will tell you what they were—not now. But even then I should have regretted to have given up my charge, now that the children have become so attached to me."

"We should hardly have liked to ask you to remain," said Miss Wardour, "had you not decided to do so of your own accord, though we should have missed you sorely. You have no idea, my dear Miss Talbot, how highly my uncle values your assistance."

"Henceforward you and I must be closer friends than ever."

Miss Wardour then spoke of several new projects that her uncle was contemplating, with a view to improve the condition of his poor parishioners, and thus sought to divert her friend's mind from dwelling upon her troubles; and to a great extent she was successful in her endeavours.

"You are very kind," said Mary, when Miss Wardour was about to take her departure for the night. "I hope I shall never give way again as I did just now; but I cannot bear people, however kind their intentions, to try to console me—not just yet. I can think over more calmly and dispassionately when I am left to myself."

So Miss Wardour embraced her young friend and departed, leaving her alone with her sorrows and her reflections.

THE POST OFFICE.

We have often taken occasion to speak of the progress of the Post Office—a progress, the details of which are duly announced in the Postmaster-General's Annual Report. Instead of giving the mere statistics of the last year, we extract from a recent article in the "Times" some passages likely to interest our readers:—

The number of letters, which in the year 1839 was estimated at 75,907,572, in the first year of the reduced tariff increased to 168,768,344, and has gone on increasing without a check to the present time, in a higher ratio than the increase of the population. In the year 1865 the number of letters had risen to 724,460,000, the books and chargeable newspapers to 97,250,000, and the samples and patterns-post to 1,280,990,000, making a total of 818,990,000 articles carried within the year by the Post Office—a number which had probably increased,

by the end of last year, to the magnificent proportions of 1,000,000,000. Such numbers as these stagger the imagination; and we may be sure that the machinery by which these myriads of letters are distributed moves with perfect smoothness and ease, for any stoppage would throw the whole correspondence of the country into the most inextricable confusion. The sorting-rooms of the General Post Office on Friday evenings, before the despatch of the night mails, present a most curious sight. Hither are brought the entire correspondence of the metropolis, and of the country districts around, that has to be passed through London, and in addition hither are brought such letters as are posted in the central district for metropolitan delivery. Of these letters only those which belong to the E.C. district are delivered from the Post Office, letters for all the other nine metropolitan districts being forwarded to them in bags, each district being now considered as a post town, sorting and delivering its own correspondence, and interchanging bags one with another. This distribution of the letter-sorting and delivery has relieved the central office of most of the work it had to perform, when, in the old days of the penny post, every district letter came to the head-office for distribution; but the vast increase of the general letters for the country has made up for this diminution of work, and at five o'clock, say, on a Friday evening, the sorters are all at their posts, and the labour of arranging the letters into the various roads and districts commences. The speed with which this operation is completed is extraordinary; the long range of pigeon-holes which face every table are speedily filled, and then the letters are stamped. In order to enable the authorities to trace letters, every stamper is supplied with a fresh stamp before commencing work. This he signs for; consequently, the envelope will at any time bear witness through whose hands it has passed previously to delivery. The book and sample post sorting is carried on at the same time, and if the publishing day of the magazines should happen to fall upon a Friday, the strain upon the office is greatly increased. The size of the book packets allowed by law is extremely liberal; parcels two feet by one foot square are permitted to pass, and the number that do go through the post testify to the great labour that falls upon the postman. The penny post for the conveyance of letters and parcels about London and its suburbs was established as early as 1683 by an upholsterer named Murray, and on its first starting parcels were not limited in weight. This was a more generous arrangement than the present parcel post, but it gradually became much restricted, and one Dockwra, who afterwards conducted the undertaking, was charged with forbidding the taking of any handboxes (except very small) and all parcels above a pound; so that, in respect of the carriage of parcels, we have not made a very great advance, but then the numbers have enormously increased. The sample post, established in 1864, has been taken advantage of by merchants and tradesmen to a very large extent. In 1865 no less than 1,280,000 samples and patterns went by post. The majority of these samples consist of produce, such as tea, sugar, coffee, hops, seeds, corn, beans, etc.; but every conceivable article under the allowed weight, from mouse-traps and clock-works to leeches and Pharaoh's serpents, now passes through the Post Office. These samples are sorted on the same counters with the letters, and their bulk, of course, is far greater. Attempts are made to burden this department with very odd articles: a limb for dissection not long since was discovered by its smell, and rejected. Letters and parcels,

when sorted, are sealed up in bags and despatched by eight o'clock to the various railway termini. We must mention, however, that the sorters can never depend upon the amount of work they may have to perform, as occasionally advertisers will swamp the tables with small packets and printed enclosures. Thus, in 1859, the Sacred Harmonic Society, and the Crystal Palace Company, posted in one day at the central office 400,000 circulars, and while we were watching the process of sorting the other evening, 100,000 circulars came in as a disturbing element in the machinery of the office. There are, however, certain regular irregularities. For instance, on Friday evenings there is a vast increase of newspapers, consequent upon the despatch to the country of the weekly newspapers. On Saturday, again, there is a great increase of letters, consequent upon the Sunday closing of the Post Office. On Monday there is a like increase from the same cause. But the most striking regular irregularity occurs on the 13th and 14th of February. Some people may imagine that St. Valentine's Day is only dear to children and nurserymaids, and that the amorous gush of correspondence that occurs on the anniversary of the saint is declining in these days of enlightenment. Alas! the gush is only becoming more impetuous. In the year 1866 there passed through the London Post Offices, for town and country delivery, 897,900 valentines, and last year the number had increased to 1,199,142, giving a revenue to the Post Office of £11,242.

The sorting of newspapers is effected in a large room, ingeniously suspended by iron rods from the roof. They come on Friday nights in such overwhelming numbers that they require a special lift, or rather series of lifts, to take them to the sorting-room; when this process has been accomplished, they are placed in sacks and sent down a shoot into the vans which await them in the yard. The Government has no monopoly in the carriage of newspapers such as they possess with respect to letters; consequently, prodigious as the number of the papers is that pass through the Post Office with the impressed stamp, a still larger number go by railway in quires unstamped; and we may state that Mr. Smith, the great newspaper agent, has a sorting-van on the railways, in which he arranges newspapers for his agents and subscribers, just in the same manner as the letters are sorted in the Government railway travelling Post Offices.

Late letters, as the public is well aware, require extra stamps, according to the lateness of the hour at which they are posted. It is not so well known, however, that at all railway stations from which a travelling Post Office runs, there is a box for the receipt of letters for delivery on that particular line of rail, up to a quarter of an hour before the starting of the mail. However convenient this arrangement may be to those pressed for time, it does not appear to be taken advantage of, if we may judge from the contents of the letter-box at the Great Western terminus, in which the average number of letters is nine, and the largest number never exceeds twenty daily. Possibly the public do not avail themselves of this arrangement, because they are not aware of its existence.

The Travelling Post Office, the most ingenious of all the arrangements of the department, is established for the sorting of all the late letters which could not be sorted in time, and for the sorting of letters received while travelling along the line. It is simply a van fitted up with pigeon-holes and counters, where, while the train is hurrying at express speed through the dark night, the sorters are hard at work arranging the letters

for delivery at the different Post Office district stations down the line. The travelling Post Office stops at long intervals, but it delivers and takes in the mail-bags when going at full speed, by a special apparatus devised by one of the *employés* of the central office. By the side of the travelling Post Office there is suspended a netting, looking very like a hammock-netting, with an opening towards the head of the carriage, and closed at the other end. The bags to be received are hung on the near side of the rail, suspended from an iron standard, and they are swept into the bag by a V shaped catch, just sufficiently strong to do its work, but sufficiently weak to give way rather than destroy anything if it should get in any way entangled. The mail bags fall with a loud thud into the netting, whence they are immediately taken, and the letters they contain are sorted—some of them, possibly, for a postal district lower down the line. The transfer from the travelling Post Office to the station is made in the same manner as from the station to the travelling Post Office. On two occasions the letter bags, while suspended from the standards, have been stolen, and the contents rifled, and on one occasion two of the registered letters were abstracted. Registered letters are always sent by themselves in a green bag. Every step of their progress is registered by the endorsement of the person through whose hands they may pass, and such is the security the public place in this method of transmitting money and articles of value, that the number has increased from 1,965,000 in 1863, and 2,130,000 in 1864, to 2,232,000 in 1865, the last return that has been published. This increase was no doubt largely due to the regulation by which unregistered letters, unquestionably containing coin, were, in 1861, charged with a double registration fee, to be paid by the addressee. The effect of this measure was to lessen the applications for missing letters containing coin, from 6,000 to 2,000 per annum. Nevertheless, the tendency of a certain class of people to break the wisest regulations in spirit, if not in fact, is evidenced by the increase of letters containing postage stamps. Senders of money in this form possibly believe that by so doing they are not throwing any temptation in the way of the postmen, but we are assured, by those versed in the matter at the Post Office, that postage stamps, if not felt through the envelope, can be smelt.

While every care has been given towards the collection and rapid conveyance of letters by the Government, the public has not assisted the department as much as it might have done. Possibly the Board of Works are mainly at fault in one particular—the want of care in properly naming and numbering the streets. Builders have created unnecessary difficulties for the postman, by the absurd repetition of the word Westbourne, for instance, which is applied to streets, groves, terraces, etc., in the western district. The nomenclature of streets is especially worthy of the supervision of the Board. There are fifty King Streets, as many Queen Streets, sixty John Streets, sixty William Streets, and upwards of forty New Streets. Again, the irregular numbering of streets is a great cause of delay in delivering the letters. In some cases the four corner houses are sometimes called No. 1. Indeed, in some of the new streets there is no sequence at all in the numbers. The inspector of letter-carriers gives a very singular case in point. He says:—"On arriving at a house in the middle of a street, I observed a brass number—95—on the door, the houses on each side being numbered respectively 14 and 16. A woman came to the door, when I requested to be informed why 95 should appear between 14 and 16; she said it was the number of a house she formerly lived at

in another street, and it (meaning the brass plate) being a very good one, she thought it would do for her present residence as well as any other!"

The returned letter office, which is one of the most singular and interesting departments of the General Post Office, is situate in St. Martin's-le-Grand Street, opposite the great building. To this department gravitate all the letters that fail to be delivered throughout the empire. It will astonish the reader, perhaps, when he is told that this number amounted in the year 1865, to 3,518,000, equal in quantity to the entire annual correspondence of many a German kingdom. Of course, we do not mean to say that the entire number failed to reach their destination eventually, or that they were all *bond fide* epistles; many were circulars, having reference to the general election of that year, many advertising circulars, but the larger proportion were genuine letters. The reasons that led to this large return of correspondence are numerous and singular. It will, perhaps, scarcely be credited, that in 1865, 12,000 letters were posted in Great Britain without any address, and these letters contained valuables in the form of checks, notes, and money to the amount of £3,700. On one occasion, £5,000 in notes were sent, improperly addressed, open at the ends, like a book packet. Not long since, the "blind men," of this department, as the decipherers of illegible and imperfect addresses are termed, were fairly beaten by the Arcadian simplicity of the following superscription on a genuine letter, containing a pair of spectacles:—

"My dear Father in Yorkshire, at the white cottage with green pailings."

It had evidently been written by a servant who, having a fond recollection of the paternal home, thought everybody in Yorkshire must be equally acquainted with it. Bad writing and spelling are a fruitful cause of failure in the delivery of letters. Some years since a letter came thus addressed:—

"Mr. Owl O'Neil,

At the Post-office."

The "blind man" into whose hands it fell, surmised at once that this was a bit of phonetic spelling, and delivered it without hesitation to Sir Rowland Hill, its rightful owner.

Every letter, after remaining in the office for a certain time, to give persons an opportunity of claiming it, is opened, and, if possible, sent back to the writer. Nevertheless, there are a large number that are destroyed. The official reasons given for non-delivery to the persons addressed, are as follows:—One per cent. are dead, three per cent. are not called for at post-offices, five per cent. are refused, five per cent. are illegibly addressed, twenty-one per cent. are addressed to persons who have gone away, and forty-five per cent. are not known as addressed. About three-fourths of these undelivered letters are returned to the senders. Out of the 600,000,000 letters posted per annum, only 3,000,000 fail to be delivered, in other words, not more than one in two hundred letters fail, or one-half per cent.

All returned letters containing articles of value, lapsed post-office money-orders, and books, are kept for two years, and, if still unclaimed, are sold at Debenham and Storr's, and the proceeds are carried to the credit of the Life Insurance Office in connexion with the Post Office, the sum being added to the extent of five per cent. on premiums of those insured.

Newspapers that fail to be delivered, in consequence of the wrappers coming off, or returned from the fact of not being stamped, or insufficiently stamped, etc., find their way to this office in large quantities. It is just possible that the department was until very lately charge-

able with the miscarriage of many of these, inasmuch as the postage-stamps were so thinly covered with gum that they fell off; 1,200,000 got loose in the Post Office in 1865. In the next year this was remedied by a thicker coating of the adhering material, and the number of loose stamps fell to 760,000. Possibly, if people would not lick stamps, but wet them, there would be still fewer failures of both letters and newspapers from this cause. The detained newspapers amount to five sacks a week. They are all torn up, and are sold for waste paper. While witnessing this destruction, we could not help thinking that a few of them would be well distributed if sent to our poor-houses and other charitable institutions, where the poor inmates have so little to cheer them in their often enforced idleness. We recommend this idea to the Post Office authorities.

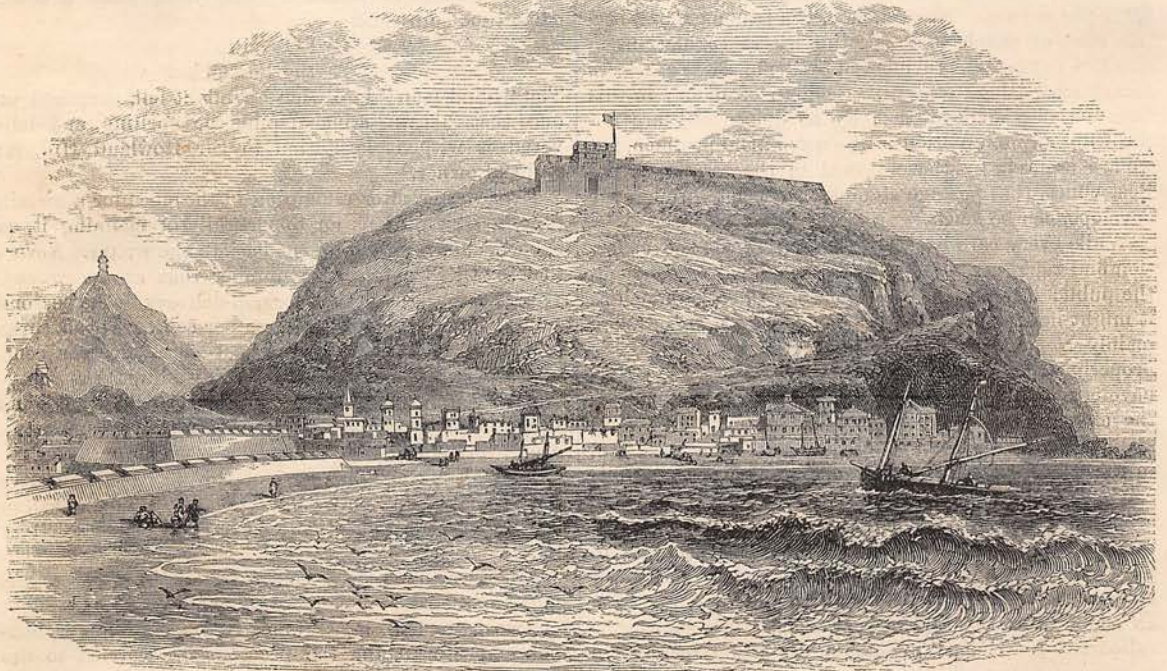
We cannot, within the limits of this article, do more than refer to the many new departments which have, of late years, been created and placed under the government of the Post Office. The Money-order Office has grown enormously, and has, in fact, superseded to a very large extent the system of bank draughts. The Savings Bank, with ramifications throughout the country, and with a receiving-house in the large percentage of its Post Offices, has become a large establishment in itself, and is every year increasing; the Government Insurances and Annuities Office—all these establishments, which may be considered satellites to the General Post Office, will grow with the growth of the country. At present they are scattered in various buildings, but it is

the intention to concentrate them in one large building to be erected, as soon as all the leases have been obtained, on the site in St. Martin's-le-Grand, opposite the Post Office, extending from Newgate Street to the Bull and Mouth. This building will, in course of time, no doubt, surpass in size the General Post Office, and the whole system, under the direction of the Postmaster-General, will probably represent the most powerful, as it is the most profitable, of all the Civil Service departments of the State.

The revenue of the Post Office, from all sources, has year by year been increasing. The last return published, refers to the year 1865, when the net revenue amounted to £1,482,522. According to the annual increase, that amount cannot now be much under two millions, which is paid into the Exchequer without any deductions. Lord Stanley of Alderley, the late Postmaster-General, clearly anticipated that in a few years it would, without in any way stinting the service, produce an income nearly equal in amount to the income-tax. Such being the case, it will become a question for the consideration of the Government, what we shall do with it. It has been often asserted that the Post Office ought not to be a source of revenue; possibly not; but we cannot help agreeing with his lordship "that it would be difficult if not impossible, to devise any mode of raising a public income less burdensome or more equitable in its operation, than that which exacts no payment without giving a service in return, and which is not open to the appellation of a tax."

TWO MONTHS IN SPAIN.

BY THE AUTHOR OF "A MERCHANT'S HOLIDAY."



SAN SEBASTIAN.

ALTHOUGH an old traveller in many parts of the world, I had never visited Spain. Vague ideas of troubles and discomforts had hitherto deterred me. But the railways, if they have destroyed the romance, have removed most of the difficulties of travelling, and, armed

with Bradshaw's Guide, and Murray's Handbook, I felt sure that the chief routes in the Peninsula must be easily accessible. Accordingly, I resolved on the expedition, a brief record of which may serve as a guide to other travellers.