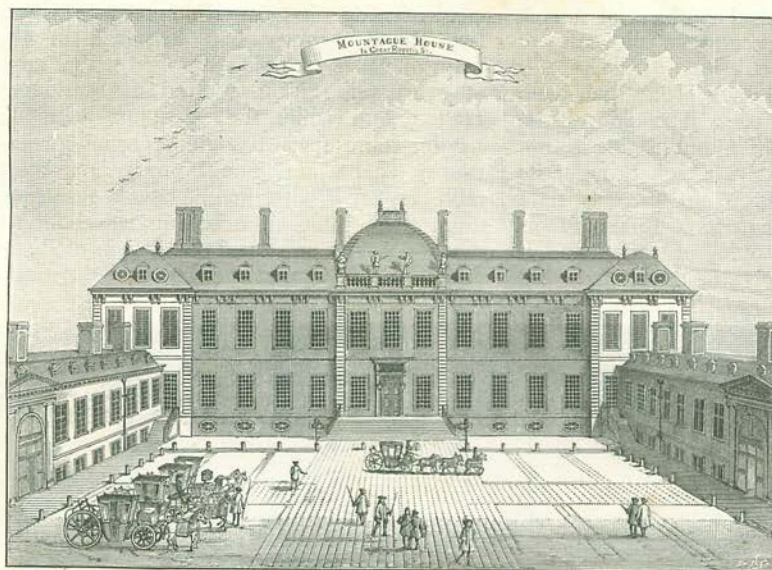


In Our National Library.

By M. SAN-LÉON.



From an

MONTAGU HOUSE—THE OLD BRITISH MUSEUM.

[Old Print.]

Take a strict view of everything
And then say this in brief:
This either is a World it self,
Or of the world is Chief.

—PHILEMON HOLLAND.



WHEN, in 1754, a safe and suitable home was wanted for treasures then become national possessions—the libraries of Sir Robert Cotton and Sir Hans Sloane, together with the

museum of the latter and the Harleian manuscripts—Montagu House was bought for £10,000. This once famous palace, of which Evelyn wrote that there was nothing more glorious in England, stood, at that time, upon the very outskirts of London; indeed, its remoteness was the only objection urged against converting it into the proposed British Museum. Fields

and farmlands stretched away from it to Hampstead Heath; while immediately behind its seven acres of beautiful grounds and gardens lay the favourite duelling rendezvous which acquired such sinister renown, that one may read of "the ground behind Montagu House" in every quarrel of the day. The palace, as it was then considered, had been built by Ralph, first Duke of Montagu. Sent in 1669

as Ambassador Extraordinary to the Court of Louis XIV., he returned to England with a taste formed upon the models of Paris and Versailles. So fixed was this influence that when he rebuilt Montagu House, after a fire which had destroyed the first of that name, he employed the celebrated French architect, Pierre Puget, and three artists of the same nationality. Of these, Monnoyer painted the garlands of flowers, Rousseau the landscapes,

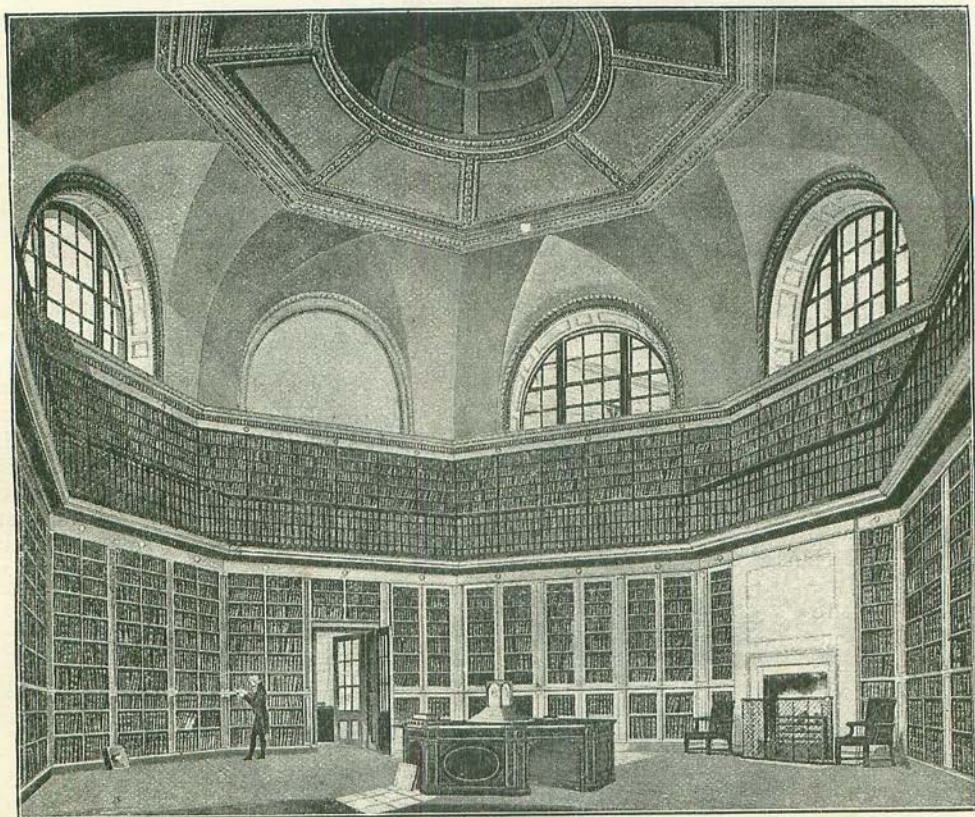


THE ENTRANCE TO THE OLD BRITISH MUSEUM.—GREAT RUSSELL STREET.

while La Fosse adorned the grand staircase and ceilings with classical subjects at a cost of £2,000 for his work and an allowance of £500 more for his diet.

Nevertheless, as Montagu House had been designed for private uses, it could not be made to serve those of a public institution without a further outlay, which brought its total cost to the nation up to the then respectable sum of £23,000. But money is occasionally the equivalent of time; and it was not until January 15th, 1759, that what

Cranmer, and Isaac Casaubon. It was also accompanied by the privilege which the Royal Library had acquired in the reign of Anne, of being supplied with a copy of every publication entered at Stationers' Hall. And while the Museum, with its reading-room in a basement corner—where twenty chairs and one "proper wainscoat table covered with green bays" furnished more than sufficient accommodation for all demands—still preserved the designs of Puget and La Fosse behind the same haughty outer



THE KING'S LIBRARY IN BUCKINGHAM PALACE.

we now call the old British Museum was thrown open "for study and inspection." And by the time that public curiosity could stand at gaze, like Joshua's moon, in Bloomsbury, King George II. had richly increased the literary stores that were to reward it.

In 1757 the Royal Library of England was added to those already gathered together in the new national collection. This gift included, among others, some printed and priceless volumes collected by Henry VII., by Henry Prince of Wales, by Archbishop

walls, which effectually excluded it from every distant view, and the massive gateway, with its glazed cupola, its clock, and flanking turrets, yet served to awe the inquisitive urchins of Great Russell Street, another truly kingly addition was made to its library.

A second royal collection, for which the superb hall known as the King's Library was expressly built, was "presented" to the nation by George IV. in 1823. At almost unmeasured cost it was gathered by George III. into that beautiful library in Buckingham Palace, where Doctor Johnson



THE KING'S LIBRARY, LOOKING TOWARDS THE
MANUSCRIPT ROOM.

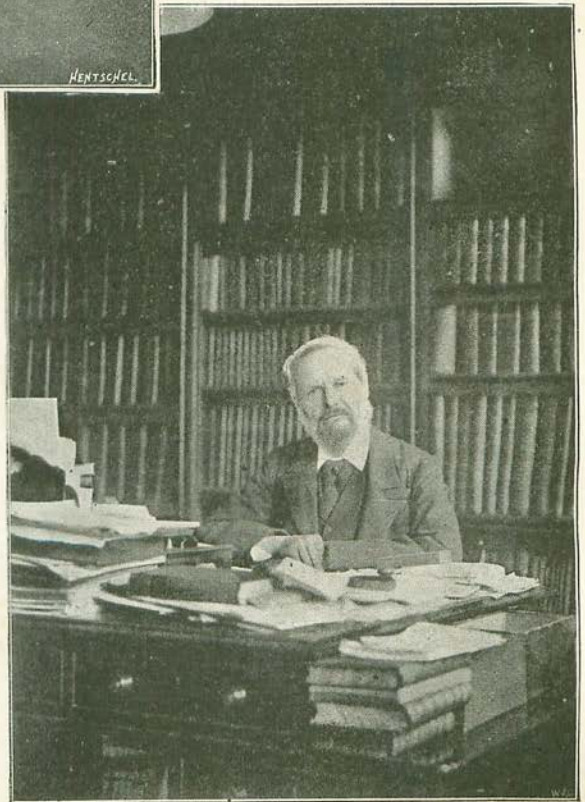
so often found a scholar's exquisite delight. Begun at a happy period for collectors, when the Jesuit houses were being dispersed and their magnificent libraries sold throughout the States of Europe, augmented from the secularized convents of Germany, and fed, as enthusiastic description has it, for more than half a century at an expenditure of little less than £200,000—it may well deserve to be called the most complete library of its extent ever collected by a single individual. And not even a London fog can impair its beauty in the noble vista of the King's Library. When the two long lines of windows are darkened, it is lighted by electric lamps that hang from the fine ceiling like a row of giant pearls. The books which are its own, and are sheltered on glass-fronted shelves that line every foot of solid wall all up and down its length of three hundred feet and thirty feet of height, the cases ranged along its central aisle for the exhibi-

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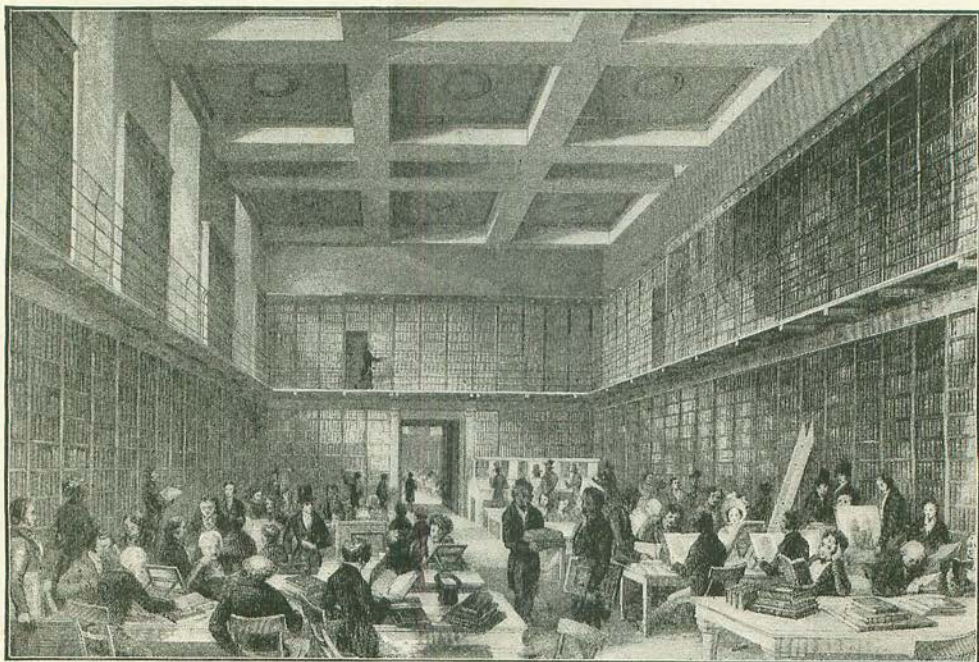
tion of unique treasures from this and many other libraries surrounding it, the inlaid floor of polished oak and mahogany—everything is radiant with arc or sunlight.

Even the electric button set in one of the lower book divisions becomes conspicuous. If it be pressed, a little door masked with book-bindings swings noiselessly outward. Then, if fortune and a very busy official favour, the visitor is conducted to an inner library assigned to the private use of the Keeper of the Printed Book Department. Here, at a desk heaped with the litter of office cares, sits Mr. Richard Garnett, C.B., LL.D., whose father was also Assistant-Keeper before him. A writer of dreamy verse and pungent prose, and the editor of many works, Mr. Garnett is noted both for his stores of memory and the kindly way in which they are ever placed at the service of less fortunate students.

In 1838, the north suite of lofty rooms was added for the already



THE KEEPER OF THE PRINTED BOOK DEPARTMENT.



THE READING ROOM OF 1838.

overflowing library. Of these the one now used as the Music Room was designed and used as a new reading-room. A contemporary engraving proudly shows its claims to the admiration of its day. The chairs, triumphantly announced to accommodate even a host of 170 readers, are well filled; at the catalogue-desk in the far corner are other eager inquirers; through the open doors, and beyond the vestibule through which readers had the exclusive right of entrance from Montagu Place, may be seen the easternmost room of the suite, then also reserved for readers desirous of studying manuscripts. As these latter had to be brought from their repository beyond the farther end of the King's Library, let us hope that demands for them were infrequent.

In the year which followed the opening of this Reading Room, 1839, there was a public announcement to the effect that it was "in contemplation" to take down the high wall surrounding the Museum, and also to materially alter the front of the building. The one was to be replaced by the light iron railing which now incloses the place; the other was to



THE NORTH SUITE OF SIX LIBRARIES, LOOKING FROM THE ARCHED ROOM.

be pulled down and sold as rubbish after the present façade of Sir Robert Smirke's designing should serve to unite and dignify the congeries of changed and new halls which had by this time massed themselves behind it. But it was not until ten years later, 1849, that the old walls of Montagu House finally disappeared in that dust which "Time hath an art to make" of all things. And it was the 3rd of October, 1850, when the *Times* could number among the other great events of the day this important one: "The British Museum is finished."

Meanwhile, manuscripts were increasingly

that enormous catalogue which Sir Anthony Panizzi jokingly declared would eventually leave no room for itself. And when it is considered that during the financial year of 1893 alone 40,511 new titles of books went to swell its bulk, the joke bids fair to become serious. Seen from the Arched Room, which stands at the western extremity of a floor-line of 450ft., the windows of this Catalogue Room contract into one gleaming square of light. Exclusive of Oriental literature, which forms a separate department under the keepership of the distinguished linguist, Professor R. K.



IN THE LARGE ROOM.

studied in the room now known as the Catalogue Room; and printed books were daily in growing demand by the readers who began to crowd the Reading Room where so many books of music are now kept that it is called the Music Room. Though, for the matter of that, it might just as well be called the French Room; for its entire gallery is occupied by a collection of pamphlets, or "tracts," concerning and covering the history of the French Revolution with a priceless completeness not to be matched in the world. The Catalogue Room, however, has a sufficient justification for its present name. For here are contained the huge duplicate volumes of

Douglas, the official work of the Printed Book Department is chiefly carried on in these six north rooms. The staff consists of senior and junior Assistant-Librarians and three Assistant-Keepers. Among them are many recognised authorities in special fields of scholarship, and many holders of University honours. Speaking of them as a body, the most carping critic must affirm of them what is true of every department in the Museum when so considered: that they illustrate the best traditions of an institution no less famed for its courtesy than by its calling.

The room adjoining the west wall of the



IN THE IRONWORK—THE LONG GALLERY.

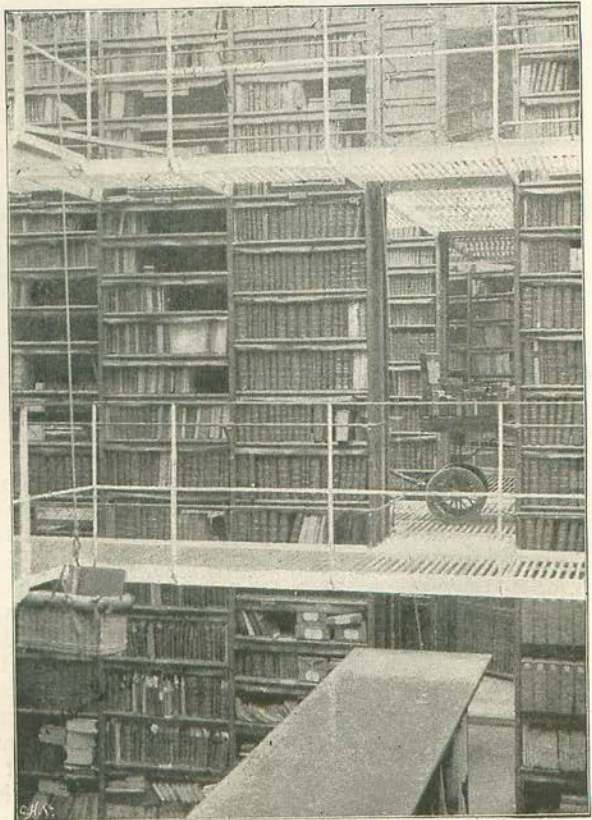
Music Room is generally known as the Large Room, although its official style is the North Library. As its familiar name implies, it is much the largest of the suite. Like all the libraries, its walls are covered with book-shelves, and have a continuous gallery, communicating with the other galleries, for access to upper presses. Notwithstanding a quiet and uniform decoration, its spacious area, massive pillars, and a certain undefinable dignity about the whole produce an impression on one who visits it for the first time which is almost that of majesty.

Well lighted by numerous windows and shaded incandescent lamps, it is the only library shared by readers; being for the most part reserved for those who wish to consult volumes too precious to be hazarded far from careful supervision. Probably this is why it is usually presided over by an official—Mr. W. Younger Fletcher, F.S.A.—who would otherwise sit in the private room allotted to him as an Assistant-Keeper. Although Mr. Fletcher has written charming and instructive chapters on his favourite study—the rare and historic bindings with which his department abounds—frequenters of the Large Room best know his innumerable

claims to the special regard in which he is held.

Among the libraries opening on every hand, and too numerous for a present visit, there is one that particularly deserves mention from its association with one of the many names which lend lustre to this National Library, with which they were or are officially connected. South of the Music Room, and also east of the Large Room from which it opens, lies the Banksian Room. Its fine library of natural history was bequeathed by that Sir Joseph Banks, Bart., who was the intimate friend of Linnæus' pupil, Dr. Solander. Banks and Solander accompanied Captain Cook in his famous voyage of 1768. Botany Bay was so called from the wealth of botanical specimens which the two friends gathered in it; and the point at which they landed from it was named Cape Solander, from the eminent Swede who was at that time an Assistant-Librarian of the British Museum. So world-wide are the eddies of this sea of literature!

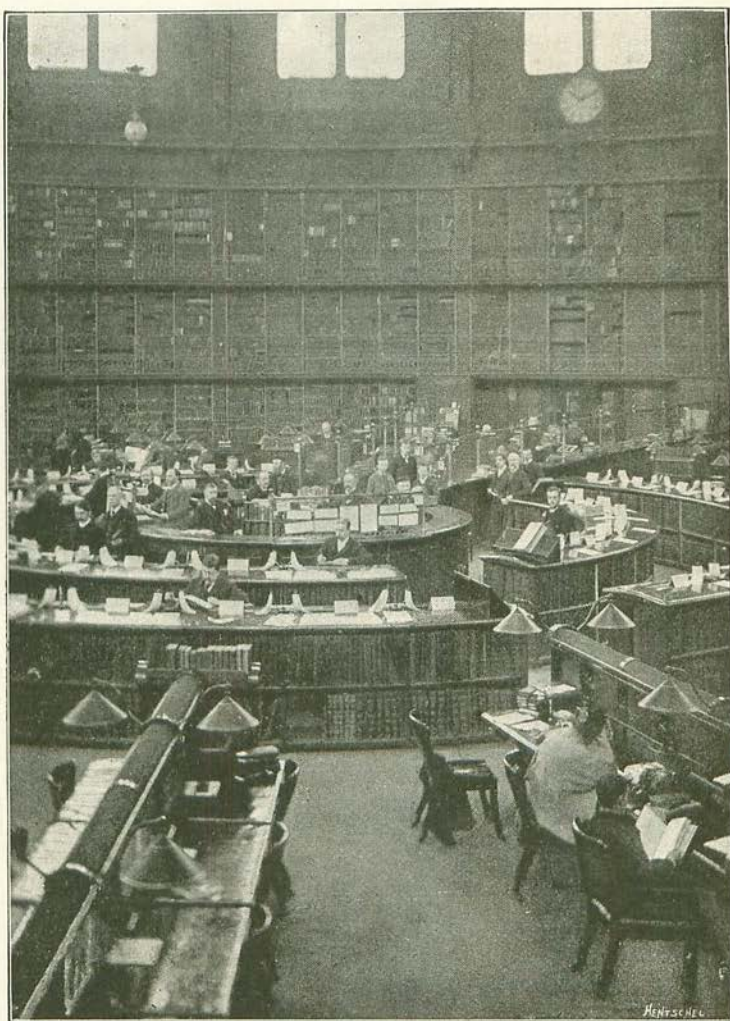
Swinging glass doors in the middle of its long south wall open out from the Large



IN THE IRONWORK—OVER THE RECEIVING "WELL."

Room into a passage which leads into what is known as the Ironwork, here separated from the great rotunda of the Reading Room by another pair of these same swinging doors, which indicate a public thoroughfare, at least so far as readers are concerned. As early as 1852, a great London daily had called the once-lauded Reading Room of that date "the Black Hole at the north-east angle." And although this was an extravagant expression of its crowded condition and consequent want of oxygen, it certainly justified Sir Anthony Panizzi, then Principal-Librarian, in urging his plan upon the Trustees. At any rate, his design, approved by the Museum architect, was eventually accepted and carried out. In May, 1854, the first excavation was made; and in May, 1857, the inner quadrangle, 313ft. long by 235ft. wide, was covered with the completed pile of ironwork and masonry. Around a central circle runs a network of book-presses. Some are necessarily fixed, but many are now of that ingenious pattern known as "sliding," by which the book-storage is practically doubled. By the help of cleverly utilized angles, the four tiers of galleries immediately encircling the Reading Room are so connected with the three tiers of straight galleries which include them that the squaring of this circle is a concrete demonstration of the marvellous. The two longer straight galleries are 258ft. in length; the two shorter are 184ft.; leaving a clear interval of from 27ft. to 30ft. all round for the lighting and ventilation of the surrounding libraries and for guarding against the risk of fire. An unquestionable authority of 1859, before the extra sliding-presses were

introduced, estimated that if the shelves of this ironwork (the presses of which are so arranged that every shelf can be regulated to three-quarters of an inch) were spaced for the average octavo book size, they would constitute in themselves twenty-five miles of linear measurement; and that if they were filled with books of average thickness of paper, the leaves of these, when placed edge to edge, would measure about 25,000 miles, or more than three times the earth's diameter. And if these ingenious computations were true of 1859, to what portentous figures would such a calculation now extend! It is more to the purpose, however, to observe that spiral staircases, at intervals of forty feet, give quick access to all parts; that by a system introduced



A SECTION OF THE READING ROOM.—LOOKING TOWARDS THE LARGE ROOM.

in 1876, the whole Library is subdivided into sections, each under the control of an attendant whose experience and familiarity with all the presses in his charge insure the least possible loss of time in procuring any book; and that this intricate maze of ironwork is so open in its construction that, from the glass roof over it all, the daylight, when there is any, streams down through floor after floor until it lights up every "well" and passage and book-shelf of the basement.

Through one of the little doors, masked on their inner side to resemble the continuous wall of 90,000 books with which the Reading Room is lined, favoured visitors are taken to the upper gallery within; and although the blue and gold of the majestic dome is dulled and almost obliterated now by dust and fog, the mind must be still duller and the imagination more obscured which can look out for the first time across that brass rail without some quickening of the breath. Twenty-four feet above the sound-deadened floor, whose diameter is 140ft., the curve of the great roof lifts, lifts, lifts, until it overhangs a height of 106ft. Twenty windows, each 27ft. high and 12ft. wide, lean along its springing arch to pour a flood of light upon nearly half a thousand readers at their desks. When night or

fog blocks up the windows, arc lights shine in the dome, and shaded incandescent lamps light up every table and desk, with their fittings of adjustable book-rests, ink, pens, blotting-pads, paper-weights, and even pen-cleaners. At every reader's feet is the warmth of hot-water pipes. The air channels which bring a fresh supply from a shaft 60ft. high and 300ft. distant are of sufficient capacity to deliver it to 500 persons at the rate of ten cubic feet per minute and at a regulated velocity. In summer a steam-engine and blower force a continuous current into the room, expelling foul air through the lantern valves. The roof contains two separate and concentric air chambers,

which extend over its entire surface. The one next the outer covering is intended to equalize the temperature in extremes of weather; and the inner one to carry off, through special apertures, the vitiated air of the room. And all these things are absolutely free to the needs of any nationality, religion, or colour.

Moving quietly but quickly about in every direction are attendants, whose politeness, intelligence, helpfulness are unsurpassed by those of any institution, and equalled by few, the world over. In the midst of all, controlling everything from his elevated desk in the centre, sits the Superintendent of the room, Mr. G. K. Fortescue, Assistant-

Keeper of the printed books. No one who has sought the Reading Room for serious study, or applied to its Superintendent for serious assistance, will need to be told what are his truly remarkable qualifications for a post which constitutes an unremitting and unsparing test of special fitness even more than of special training. Mr. Fortescue's "Subject Index" is a godsend to many a bewildered seeker. But although its ponderous volumes offer a queer commentary upon private recreation, they may safely be said to but partially index the subjects upon which their compiler is consulted. The period and



THE SUPERINTENDENT OF THE READING ROOM.

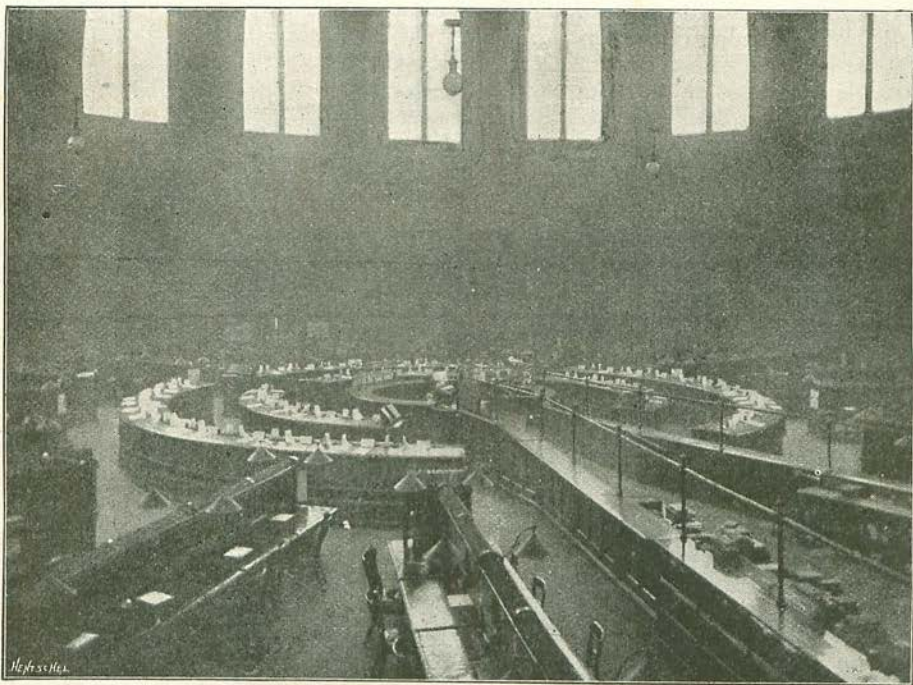
people of the French Revolution are known to be peculiarly his own; yet many a remote study daily owes its successful pursuit to a breadth of reading which is only less liberal than its use.

But the great dome, whose diameter is only two feet less than the Roman Pantheon, and exceeds that of the Cathedral of St. Peter by one foot, must be looked its last on for the day. It is wonderful to think how lightly its 4,200 tons of material weight soar away up from the twenty iron piers which support it. But it is more impressive to conjure up a vision of its solemn suggestion of vastness when night, or Sunday, or early morning hushes its last whisper into absolute still-

ness; and when not so much as a human shadow may move across its misty void. As it is, the little door swings noiselessly back into place and shuts out the subdued murmur inseparable from such a hive of individuals and pursuits. The visitor descends two of the spiral stairways, passes along another section of the circular iron gallery on the ground-floor, and is shown out through a door which opens only to pass-keys.

reference-works with which readers supply themselves from its lower presses—such a reading-room is surely a portent of new forces that must be reckoned with in the twentieth century.

These are things for any sober intelligence to ponder, after even a superficial and half-complete survey of but one department in a museum of departments. It may also be suspected that the supreme official of



THE READING ROOM—A MISTY MORNING BEFORE WORK BEGINS.

Opposite to it is a similar door, leading into the same circle in reverse. Between them runs a passage of some thirty feet, which at this inner end opens by swinging doors into the Reading Room, and at the outer end opens by two other glass doors into the great entrance-hall. Here two attendants scrutinize all claims to admission; and when these are passed, in exit, one has also passed from among many things which affect the imagination as *Power*. A reading-room that cannot satisfy the demands for its 458 seats—around which two millions of books are being steadily augmented at an annual rate of over fifty thousand—which has a daily average of six hundred and fifty readers, to whom it supplies 1,402,815 books in the course of but one year alone, to say nothing of all those thousands of

them all finds a good deal more than this to make him ponder. The administration of such multitudinous, vital, perhaps often conflicting interests, can make up no light sum of daily cares. Yet, looking to the way in which the office of Principal Librarian is at present filled by one among the greatest, if not indeed the greatest, of living palæographers—Mr. E. Maunde Thompson, C.B., D.C.L., LL.D.—the tranquil title reads less like a satire and more like a description.

But the "closing hour" strikes. The great gates clang to behind the last lingering visitor to our National Library

The writer, from whose photographs this article is chiefly illustrated, feels that some public acknowledgment is due to the special kindness, even more than to the special permission, of the Library officials, which has alone made it possible to present readers of *THE STRAND* with views otherwise quite unattainable.