

## Catching the Mail-Bags.

WITH SPECIAL PHOTOGRAPHS TAKEN BY THE AUTHOR.

By R. H. COCKS.

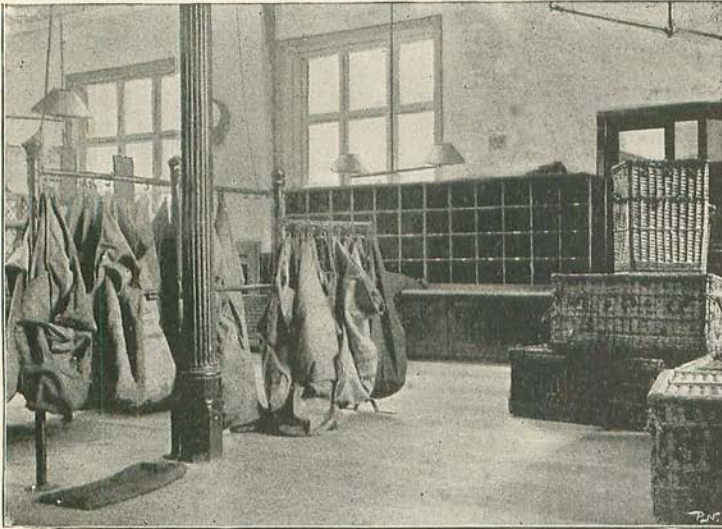


FIG. 1.—THE STATION POST-OFFICE. BAGS WAITING TO BE FILLED.



HERE are many ways of spending an afternoon with less pleasure and interest than that which I am about to relate. Although we all receive our letters with but seldom varying regularity, there are few perhaps who give any thought to the amount of toil entailed to gain this end; and if occasionally our despatches do get delayed in transit, we censure all concerned, not considering for a moment the various causes that readily account for any such delay.

Recently it has been my object to spend a few afternoons at various mail-stations on some of our great iron roads, and cull information concerning this interesting and very important branch of postal processes. With this end in view, having obtained the necessary permits, and armed with a reliable hand-camera, I first wended my way to one of these mail-stations, where the only day mail (and this at a some-

what late hour) thunders past, catching and depositing mail-bags.

Let us first give a passing glance inside the station post-office before proceeding farther up the line to the apparatus. We see here (Fig. 1) the empty letter-bags hanging in readiness to be filled and dispatched to their various destinations, as the name on each will indicate, and the mail-baskets that are carried by ordinary stopping trains, containing the parcels, etc. We must not stay long, as the

mail is to be up to time to-day, and the minutes are slipping by.

It has been my experience on my several visits to find at his post a courteous and well-informed postman in charge, who invariably arrives some few minutes before the mail is signalled. The postman's first duty on arriving is generally to open his receiving-net—a simple operation, but one very easily omitted, to which I shall have reason to refer later. This net (Fig. 2), with

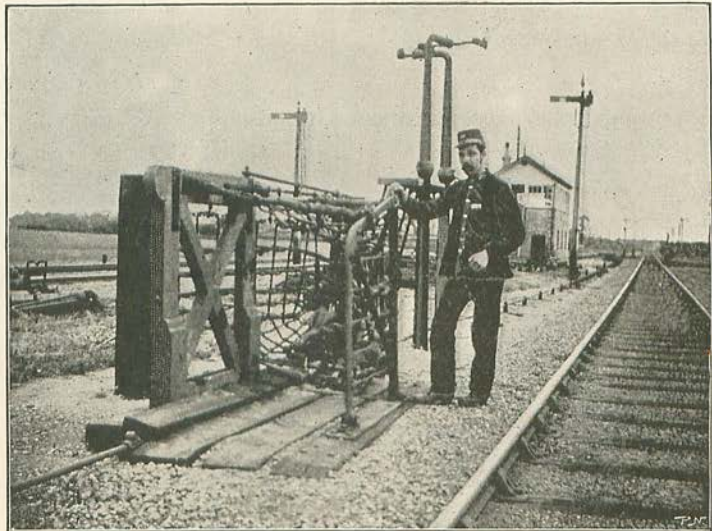


FIG. 2.—THE RECEIVING-NET READY FOR USE.

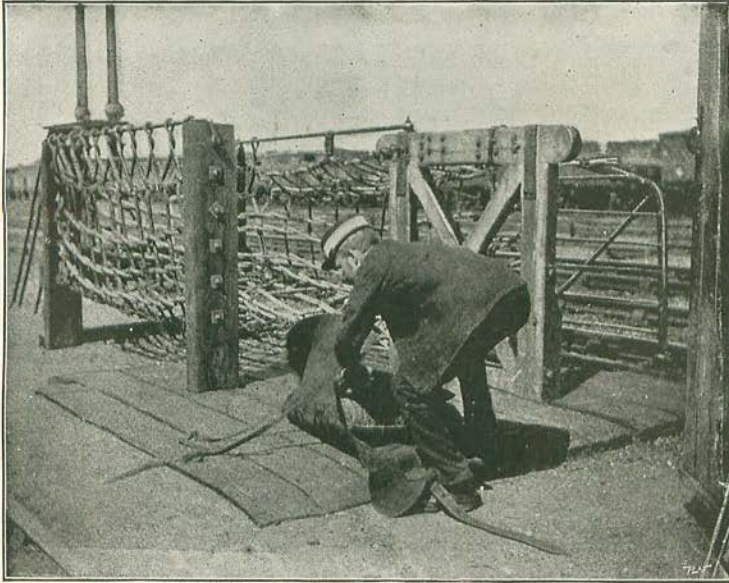


FIG. 3.—PACKING THE MAIL-BAG IN THE LEATHER POUCH.

its large rope meshes, looks at first glance most complicated, but is in reality a simple device.

It is shaped, we may notice, something like the letter **V**, and to prepare it all that has to be done is to prop up in a perpendicular position an iron support resembling a gate, which rests parallel with the rails and is about 3ft. distant from the net. In Fig. 2 we see it ready for use, and in Fig. 4 it is closed.

This "gate" works on a hinge at its base, and to close it an iron stay is let fall and the "gate" leans inclining inwards from the rails against a wooden one, similar, but immovable. These "gates" hold the receiving-net open.

Secondly, the postman (for many of the men in charge of this day-mail service are rural postmen, taking this as their last duty of the day) straps up his bag (Fig. 3), climbs and hangs it upon the "standards" (Fig. 4). The net, it will be observed, in the foreground is here closed. These "standards" are the iron brackets

which swing round into position for use, a catch at their base holding them secure.

After use they are always turned inwards out of the reach of passing trains; not that an ordinary passenger train would strike them, but a goods train heavily laden probably would do so.

Next we clamber up and take a glance at the simple catch device from which the bag is suspended. At each mail-station there are generally two standards, one single and one double, the latter being used when there

are more bags to be sent, which is usually the case with the night mails.

This catch is a short bar of about 2in. in length, always pointing in the direction the train takes. Upon this bar slides the thick, solid strap of the bag, a metal tube in the leather fitting exactly over it. Then the snap, actuated by a powerful spring, retains the strap and bag in position. Should, however, a gale be blowing at the time, this snap is also fastened down with some special string used, that there may be no possibility of the bag shifting.



FIG. 4.—TURNING THE STANDARDS INTO POSITION.

Lastly, we may take a cursory glance at this "pouch," as the bag is more properly termed, and we find it to be a substantial leather case opening out flat, with four flaps, into which is placed the sealed canvas bag which postmen usually carry.

This, then, is rolled up, as in Fig. 3, strapped securely, slid upon the bar of the "standard," and finally swung round into position, as we see it in Fig. 5.

All being in readiness, the postman repairs to his cabin close by, and if this mail-station is far from a signal-box, there is an electric bell in connection, by means of which the postman signals his readiness, and the signalman responds.

A few brief moments elapse, the signals fall, and a distant roar is heard of the approaching mail. Very quickly she is in sight and spreads her nets, like some winged living thing, and swooping down carries off her plunder (Fig. 6). This net on the sorting van (which should be always next to the locomotive) must not be set before the mail train is within 200 or 300 yards of the "standards," but now and again is prepared earlier if the lines are clear of passing trains and objects close to the metals.

It is set by a lever within the car, and is closed on all sides but that which faces the engine, and this offers a wide open space to catch the pouches, which at times are of

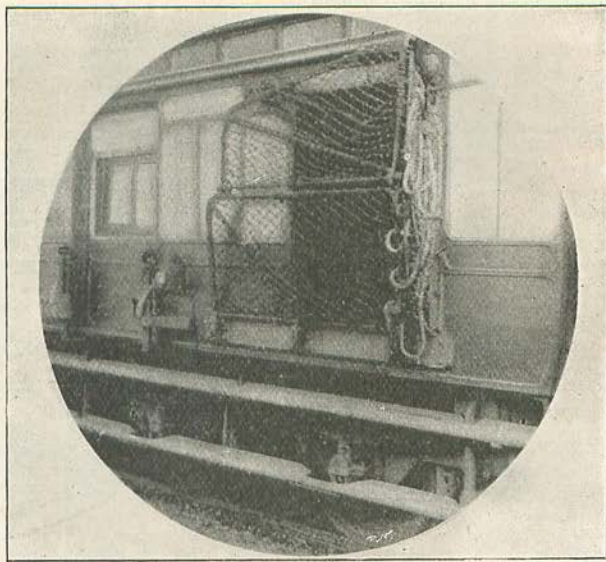


FIG. 6.—APPARATUS ON MAIL-VAN.

considerable compass and formidable weight. The engine has now dashed past the apparatus, and the net on the car following slips off the bags (Fig. 7), which roll down inside the car, wrenching open the snap and bursting the string that may have been tied round in addition. Simultaneously, an arm on the same principle as the stationary "standard" springs out some little distance off the ground alongside the net (Fig. 7), to which is attached the bag to be deposited in the net. This pouch, like the others, is suspended by a powerful strap, which, coming in contact with the cross-piece from gate to gate of the net, is released from the snap and hurled to the end of the net or to the corner of the V, the length of the net breaking the concussion.

The whole process of the exchange is but momentary, as the mail, represented in Fig. 7, was travelling at a mile a minute. This I gathered on the most reliable authority, and under these conditions, added to which are other difficulties, such as the time of day being advanced, when the light is weak, enormous vibration, and seizing the right moment for exposure, a good result is anything but an easy matter to obtain.

Lastly, we must take a glimpse at the interior of the sorting tender, or "aerial trawler," as this portion of the apparatus has been aptly

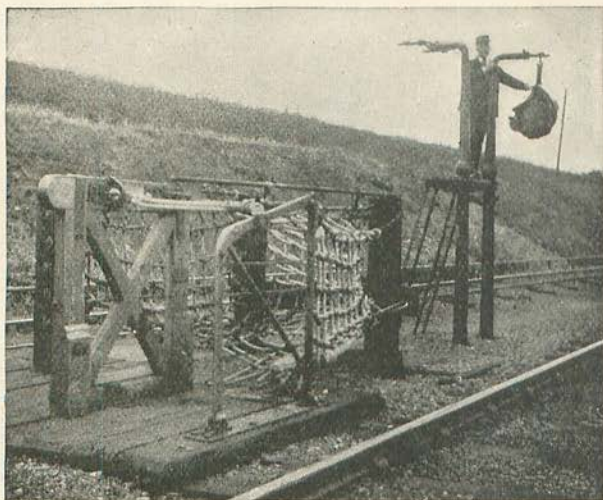


FIG. 5.—APPARATUS ALL READY.

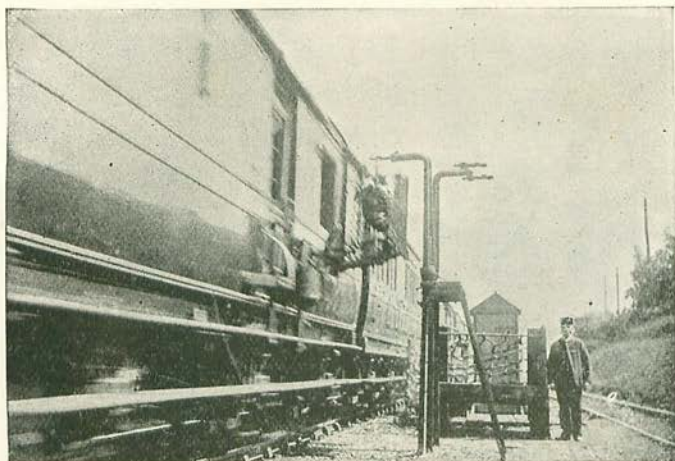


FIG. 7.—THE POUCH JUST LEAVING THE STANDARD.

termed (Fig. 8). To secure an illustration of this was by no means a light task, for, in the first place, the mail makes a brief halt of only two minutes, and nearly the whole of this time is required for loading up, every second being of value to the officials in their race against time. Then the lighting of the car, being for the most part obtained by artificial means, made a rapid execution an impossibility, and my sitters were into the bargain rather restless.

All the bags received are here unsealed, and their precious contents stamped at the rate of sixty per minute (as also the extra foreign and Colonial mails on two days in the week), the sorters never pausing for a moment, whilst quickly scanning the miscellaneous specimens of handwriting, and consigning the letters to their respective pigeon-holes, which, we notice, extend the entire length of the right side of the car; the receiving net being on the left-hand side just behind us. These sorters, who work either by day or night, are as hard-working a body of men as can well be found, and they perform their duties unostentatiously under all manner of trying conditions in this oscillating vehicle.

But recently it was my misfortune to be the indirect cause of the pouches being missed in the receiving-net on the ground. The postman got

chatting, and departed from his customary routine of procedure on arriving at his post (for method and system are everything in even so apparently a simple device as this.) In obliging me, by suspending the pouches on a standard better adapted by its position for a photograph, he omitted propping up the net; consequently the mail dashed past, taking his bags safely but leaving nothing in return.

There was no delivery in the town that night, or, in fact, any of the neighbour-

ing villages next morning. However, the matter was satisfactorily explained to the General Post Office officials, who came down next day to make inquiries, and the postman was quite exonerated.

The bags were taken direct up to London—some fifty miles off, and the matter thus reported by the sorting-van officials.

The Postmaster-General, as it may be remembered, offered some years back a substantial sum for any improvement in the present method of transferring the bags, but, as yet, no suggestion has taken the place of this process; a simple, highly ingenious, and at the same time reliable contrivance for catching the mails.



FIG. 8.—INTERIOR OF THE SORTING-CAR.