

PROGRESSIVE WELLINGTON

THE POST AND TELEGRAPH DEPARTMENTS.—PART III.

THESE are certain subjects for wit, certain well worn, crusted jokes of which the professional humourist seems never to tire. They are conceived and brought forth in picture, jokelet, and funny par with such regularity and such unnatural frequency that one can scarcely wonder that nowadays most are still born, and fail to raise a smile amongst even the most easily tickled. Certainly one of the greatest favourites is the one which represents the Civil Service clerk as a man of abundant leisure, whose most serious work is the study of a sporting paper or the latest betting reports. Save for the fact that it would be a most inhuman and unkindly action to rob the unfortunate joke manufacturer of any of the tools of his trade, we should like to take him over almost any of the branches of almost any of our civil service offices, but more especially would we love to take such a one round the mail room of a big post office, say Wellington or Auckland, on a big mail day. The joke ament the civil service clerk and his elegant and interminable leisure would die a sudden death never to be resurrected. We do not know where you could find a scene of brisker work, we had almost said more feverish work, but this would give a wrong impression, for though everything is being done at a speed that makes one's head and eyes ache to watch, there seems an absolute absence of anything approaching flurry. The clerks, with quick-glancing eyes and nimble fingers, might be so many automata for aught they seem to feel. They work with the exactitude and at the pace of some marvellously-made piece of mechanism, only without the slightest noise, save only the constant thump of the clerks who pound letters with lightning-like rapidity with the heavy date and post-mark stamps. Come, let us examine the mail room together. The room is large and well lighted. At a medium sized and strongly-constructed table stand the clerks or stampers previously referred to stamping letters. They keep up a continual thump thump with their stamps, new heaps of letters being supplied them as soon as ever they show signs of getting through what they have. These letters are brought from the boxes or bags 'faced'—that is to say with the names and addresses all right showing. It would be interesting to know how many letters these quick stampers can go through in an hour, 120 to 130 a minute, we were told. At that rate it would certainly run into four figures, and substantial ones at that. Newspapers, books, parcels, etc., are treated the same way. Such is the first process.

Letters are then removed to the tables seen running down the centre of the room. It will be seen these tables are divided into four compartments on each side, and each compartment has three ledges. It is not entirely easy to explain, in black and white, the process of sorting, but it is the simplest imaginable in execution. As has been said; the table is divided into four compartments each side, and each of these compartments is a district. On the top ledge

of each are placed the letters for distribution in the boxes. On the second are placed in rough assortment those for delivery by letter carriers, while on the third or lowest shelf may be seen those destined for different country places and districts. This primary sorting is performed with the utmost



MAIL ROOM

dispatch, the speed at which the officers work being almost incredible. With a view to proving what was already known and for our edification a test was made the other morning, with the result that some of the best sorters averaged 70 letters per minute. Only really experienced sorters can do so well. As to what might be considered a maximum day's work in the circulating branch at Wellington, the following is about the best:—234 bags of mails received, opened, and disposed of, 164 bags closed and dispatched, and over 100 bags of forward mails checked in and out of the office, a total of 498 bags handled during one particular day. This, in April last year, was, of course, a very long day. The number of letters and other articles dealt with were 69,910, or within a fraction of 70,000; but

this does not represent the actual work, inasmuch as many of the letters and other articles had to be dealt with as often as three and four times.

The letters for delivery in town are subsequently re-sorted at tables of precisely similar construction by the carriers. Walk further down the room and you shall find two areas of mail bags, for that seems the only manner in which they may be described. There is a table in the centre, and hung all round in circles and tiers are the mail bags, their wide and seemingly voracious mouths held agape for papers by strong hooks. By the side of the table stands the officer-in-charge sorting newspapers. A great pile of papers is placed for him on the table, and with swiftly-flying hands, he with artful knack pitches papers here and there as a conjurer throws cards amongst his audience in the dress-circle, stalls, and gallery. Each paper falls true into the bag for which

it is destined, that bag bearing, of course, the name of some country place or another. These bags are not touched till the mail is on the point of closing, then the letter mails are put in and the bag sealed up, except, of course, where the size of the mail necessitates a separate bag for the letters and papers.

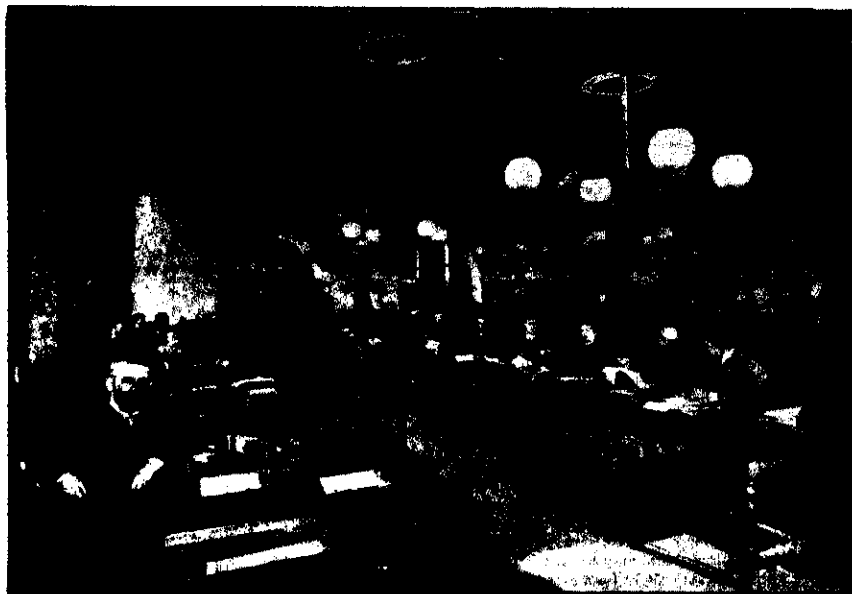
In the Wellington district where so many of the mails are train mails, much of the primary sorting is done by the mail agents on the train, and this lessens the office work very considerably. The letters and papers from Home are made up in one large mail for the colony—at least that is all the Home Government contract to do, and any extra sorting has to be duly paid for. Such sorting takes place by the Brindisi and Suez mails, which are divided into four for Wellington, Auckland, Canterbury, and Otago, each of these places including the surrounding districts. The 'Frisco' mail is, however, made up for the colony as a whole, and is sorted into districts by the mail agent on the specially fitted up mail room on the 'Frisco' mail boats, this officer being, of course, in the service of the colonial, not the Imperial Post Office.

Though the improvement in the Brindisi service has been so marked of late and brought so much of the news which formerly came by 'Frisco, the increase of work—of letters sent and received—has been so great that, notwithstanding all the intermediate mails, the San Francisco service brings larger mails than ever. The postal service of New Zealand is one of which she may well be proud, and one which reduces to a minimum the obvious disadvantages under which a country must labour whose principal towns are situated as ours are.

TELEGRAPH OFFICE.

Almost more interesting is it to go into the telegraph department. In 1871 there were 344 miles of line in the Wellington district, and in 1891 there were 576. In 1871 the number of telegrams sent was 114,093, but in 1891 it was 441,115. The revenue was £7,581 in 1871 and £13,546 in 1891, this of course not including the amount for Government messages, which would for 1891 have brought up the revenue to £22,659. A curious point is that the proportion of telegrams sent to 100 letters was 15.26 in 1871, and in 1891 was 10.85.

As we are on figures it may not be altogether uninteresting to inquire into the statistics for the whole colony. There were in 1891, 5,349 miles of lines and 13,235 lines of wire. The number of stations open was 573, and the number of telegrams forwarded was 1,968,264. The revenue was £117,633 without Government messages, and £142,474 with



OPERATING ROOM—TELEGRAPH DEPARTMENT.