

CHRISTMAS TIME, 1890, AT THE LONDON POST OFFICE.

The Controller of the London Postal Service thus graphically describes the operations of the Post Office in London at the Christmas season in the jubilee year of the inland uniform penny-postage :—

It may fairly be asserted that one of the minor wonders of the century is the diffusion, through the agency of Her Majesty's Post Office, of social greetings, cards, and presents at the Christmas season, numbering, with the ordinary correspondence, more in a few days than the missives in postal circulation throughout the whole of the first year after the introduction of the marvellous penny-postage system, the jubilee of which has during the last few months been so gloriously celebrated. What has been accomplished this year once more demonstrates that, as the postal service is one of the most powerful levers in the nation's progress at ordinary times, it can add vast enjoyment to the classes and masses by its quick and wide-spreading circulation on exceptional occasions such as that just over. The busy and impressive scenes witnessed at the last Christmas season in the old General Post Office building at St. Martin's-le-Grand, and its rapidly-developing parcel-post sister office at Mount Pleasant; at the 200 district, branch, and sub-offices dotted over the metropolis; and in the travelling post-offices running through the length and breadth of the country, were such that they could not well be dismissed, even temporarily, from the minds of those who in probable course would have to shape the arrangements for the season of 1890; and it may be said that the echoes of the previous Christmas had scarcely died away ere preparations were commenced, and were going on all the year, to put the department in a position to undertake its great annual task, and to overcome all the difficulties inherent to it.

Primarily, attention had to be paid to the question of additional space in which to do the work. The valentine has had its day, the number dealt with in London having dwindled from 4,000,000 in 1876 to 320,000 in 1890. The Christmas card is still as popular as ever, but that, too, may in the near future cease to be a fashionable medium of conveying an expression of kindly feeling. Neither one nor the other affected the question of space so much as the Christmas parcels. It must be expected that the parcel-traffic will bring in its train year by year a greater task for the Post Office to accomplish, and for this work to be satisfactorily and expeditiously got through, ample room in buildings and yards is a *sine qua non*.

A few weeks before Christmas in a short leader in one of the daily newspapers it was stated that there was a serious falling-off in the Christmas-card wholesale trade; but this was speedily contradicted in the same newspaper by a large manufacturer, who stated that the demand for cards was equal to, if not greater than, that in any former year. That statement accorded with information previously supplied by the principal wholesale vendors of Christmas cards in London, and was borne out by the large increase in the number of Christmas and New Year's cards despatched to places abroad, which was a clear indication of what might be expected as regards the inland postings later on.

Irrespective of these signs, however, with the previous Christmas season in mind, when the stress of both letter- and parcel-work was so great as to be quite beyond the utmost efforts of the regular and extra force to deal with it in a satisfactory manner, it was deemed prudent to prepare for the strain this year by the engagement of a much larger supernumerary staff than on the last occasion. The total number of extra officers employed was 4,050, or 410 more than in the preceding year. These, added to the officers regularly employed in or on behalf of the London postal service, made up a total of about 20,000. The men required for sorting duties had to be placed in training several weeks beforehand to fit them for the work.

The first outgoing Christmas letter-mails were those for the Colony of New Zealand. The two fortnightly mails affected took 9 per cent. more letters, &c., between them than were despatched by the corresponding mails in the previous year. The increase over two ordinary mails was 35 per cent. The next principal mails to be despatched were those for the Australian Colonies. Those sent by the all-sea route were not appreciably affected by the Christmas cards, but by the overland route, *via* Brindisi, there was a considerable increase. The postal articles sent by the four-weekly Australian mails which took the Christmas and New Year's cards rose by 10 per cent. over the previous year's figures, and the increase over an ordinary period was 36 per cent. The heaviest mail was carried by the Peninsular and Oriental Company's steamer "Massilia," which took 622 mails-bags, containing about double the usual number of letters, &c.

The Christmas and New Year's correspondence caused a very considerable addition to the mails for India, China, and the East. The four mails affected thereby consisted of 2,633 bags, as against 2,060 by four ordinary mails, and 2,395 by the four corresponding mails of last year.

The letters, &c., sent by the three Cape mails which carried the bulk of the Christmas and New Year's cards were 50 per cent. in excess of the letters, &c., sent by three ordinary mails. One mail alone consisted of 280 bags, whereas 257 was the largest number sent by a single mail at the previous Christmas season.

Nearly 100 additional bags were despatched by the Christmas mails to the West Indies, as against about 70 at the previous Christmas season.

The splendid steamers of the Cunard, White Star, and Allan lines, which are constantly crossing the waters which divide the Old from the New World, carried heavier mails than usual. The posting of Christmas and New Year's cards for the United States and Canada was spread over three weeks, and the mail-bags despatched to the United States during that period were 2,739, and to Canada 797. This exceeds the number of bags despatched during three ordinary weeks by 1,164 and 317 respectively. During the week ended the 13th December, 1,455 bags in all were sent from London to the North American continent, being an increase of 259 on any previous record.

The mails from India, China, and the East, which arrived on the 15th December, consisted of 56 bags more than usual. The excess letters were 23,000 and the newspapers 12,250, while the registered letters rose from 2,800, the normal number, to 4,200. The succeeding mail, which arrived four days before Christmas, was correspondingly heavy. By the mail from Australia, which arrived on the 23rd December, 90 extra bags and 40,000 additional letters, &c., came to hand. About 600 extra