

Railway Mail Clerks.

Mr. C. M. Sinclair, in the *Dominion Illustrated Monthly* for January, has a very able article on the subject of the Railway Mail Clerks of Canada. As he points out in the commencement, the general public have only a faint and vague idea of the duties of the travelling post office, and the work of the railway mail clerk. The following are some extracts from Mr. Sinclair's interesting article:—

Ask the average citizen where the sorting of the ever-increasing mail matter is done and the almost invariable answer will be—why, in the post offices of course—meaning, thereby, the stationary, not the travelling post offices. Indeed the number of people who have never heard of such a convenience as a travelling post office is truly remarkable when we consider that the present day tendency is to turn the fierce searchlight of the modern press on all relations of life. In no other department so intimately connected with the public welfare are the masses less informed than they are in this important branch of the P. O. Department. This immunity from publicity arises largely no doubt from the inflexible rule that no person outside of the mail-clerks in charge and the P. O. Inspector or his assistants are allowed in the mail-car. It is rightly held by the department that the safety and sacredness of the people's mail is a moral as well as a material trust and that all chances of its being tampered with should be carefully guarded against. Consequently the few persons in this bustling, hurrying age who do not stop for a moment to consider what are the duties of the man whom they see in the mail-car door at the different stations handing out and receiving mail-bags—conclude in an indefinite hazy way that his and the baggageman's functions are very similar. They reason from the imperfect data at their command that the mail-clerks are handed in labelled bags which they deliver at the points specified. They do not—indeed cannot know that as the trains on the different railways speed North, South, East and West, busy hands and brains, in close cars often overheated, surrounded by heaped mail-bags, are sorting up more than three fourths of the total daily mail. They do not know that the bags received are opened in a trice often before the train has time to get under motion again—the contents swiftly sorted then and the bagging up for the next delivery hurried forward as the whistle is sounding for the depot. The general public have no knowledge of the fact that often mail-clerks after running over a route for years could not recognize the salient features of the country traversed by reason of never having had leisure to look out of the windows. True they catch glimpses of the outlook near the station but their business in life is to do quickly and correctly their work and they are not on board to admire scenery. Could an outsider peep in the car he could see, though it might be midwinter—men with their coats off, sleeves rolled up, working as if their life depended on a supreme effort, for be assured theirs is no kid glove duty. On the contrary it demands a hearty co-operation of brain and muscle—brain in order that a mental map of the different and quickest routes may be spread out like an open book before the sorter, and muscle so that the indispensable dexterity may be exercised, for quickness combined with accuracy are essentials to keep up the pace. Let those who perhaps think the railway mail-clerks duties light and a “soft snap” because they see him with a few hours at his disposal—his trip finished—reflect what is meant by sorting letters and post cards at the rate of four thousand an hour. Yet on many routes this rate of speed must be attained and maintained in order to get through the work.

Speed is desirable, nay indispensable, but accuracy

is quite as important a factor; for a letter sorted one pigeon-hole to the right or left of the proper one may mean days of delay as one may indicate Manitoba, the other New York City. These days of delay may mean to the sender or receiver—notes gone to protest—engagements unfulfilled—friendships sundered or mayhaps loving hearts broken. They mean weary anxious waiting for the delayed letter and in every case they mean a sense of annoyance. It is therefore impressed on every mail-clerk on his entrance to the service that speed *must* be accompanied by absolute accuracy—indeed all the slips with which letter-packages are faced have printed directions to report on the back all missent letters. In addition, the clerks are required to report for examination every two months until they make 95 per cent. On sortation and afterwards once a year or oftener if required. That remarkable accuracy is attained is shown by the confidence of the business public who leave to the last moment letters of vital importance to be answered secure in the conviction that they will get there on time.

The position and duties of the railway mail-clerk are unique in many respects. Working with every nerve at the utmost tension, hand and brain in lightning touch, with map-photographs chasing each other swiftly across the mind whilst above all and around all the dull roar and throb of the engine almost against the partition of the car, do you wonder that at the end of a busy run he gets off the train pumped out of energy? His work differs from nearly all other clerical work inasmuch as there is absolutely no postponement or holding over for the morrow. It must be done there and then. The train is rushing on, every station adds their quota, no mail matter must be carried by and the mails must be ready for delivery. At every station your sortation good or bad is passing beyond your control not to be recalled and every minute the terminus is nearer at hand where all the remaining matter must be ready, bagged up and properly labelled for waiting trains. At such times let anything go wrong and he is a cool man who does not get rattled. Suppose, for example, your registered letter list does not balance when near the end of your trip—suppose it shows in staring figures that will not be gainsaid that you have received one more registered letter than you can account for. You cannot like a bookkeeper, sit down and calmly review the transactions, item by item, until you reach the mistake, simply because there is no time. In ten minutes the train will be drawn up at the station and the mail carrier will be rapping on the car door for all your mail to deliver to other routes, and thus your only tangible evidence will pass into other hands and the mistakes be duly reported. Should the missing registered letter fail to reach the person to whom it is addressed, the mail clerk at fault is required to make it good, and the uncertainty of the amount about which, of course, he absolutely knows nothing, does not by any means add to his comfort. Well, as I remember, how this truth was first impressed on my own mind when I entered the service. I was learning the road, and the clerk in charge—one of the coolest and brainiest of Irishmen I ever met—could not get his sheet to balance. The full import of this was not apparent to me in my untutored state and I could not understand the distress of this strong man: the perspiration stood in great beads on his forehead, though it was midwinter, and his agitation was so great that he could not add the columns correctly though the total was trifling, whilst the roar and rush of the train bringing us nearer our destination added momentarily to his distress. The error was fortunately discovered just as the engine was sounding for the station and the recoil from the

mental strain almost unmanned him again. For, be it remembered that such a mistake may mean, not only financial loss, but loss of position, and far worse than either may mean a worse stigma attached to your name for life. It will be easily understood then that the security of the registered letters is closely looked after by the mail clerk (in common with all the other mail matter.)

Persons given to a loose and careless mode of speaking sometimes refer to the insecurity of sending registered letters. Indeed, I have it from a graduate of a leading Canadian Business College that one of the lecturers—a prominent lawyer, who ought to have known better—referred to the registration of letters as an inducement to loss,” in the course of a lecture to the students. It is quite true the Post Office Department does not guarantee to make good all losses sustained in sending by registered letter. A moment's thought will show an impartial observer that this is obviously impossible—the contents not being known—but the department does guarantee to trace a registered letter and compel the dishonest or careless employee to make restitution when at all possible, and be punished in addition. How well this is performed is evidenced by the report of the Post Master General which shows in cold type no loose statements or exaggeration, that out of a total of 3,280,000 registered letters which were handled by the Canadian Post Office Department, during the year ending on June 30th, 1890, only 24 such letters were irrevocably lost so that the contents were not recovered. The greater part of even this small number were letters lost through unavoidable causes, such as fires, etc.

In scores of cases the non-receipt of a registered letter is reported to the Post Office Inspector, a “trace” (official letter) is sent out and when it finally reaches the office of delivery it is discovered that the letter has not been called for or has been safely delivered to the person to whom it was addressed.

All mail matter not addressed or indefinitely addressed, finds its way to the Dead Letter office, and what strange flotsam and jetsam does eventually fetch up there? Here are some of the articles selected at random from the Post Master General's report, 1890:—Base-ball contract, diamond ring, ear-drums, false teeth, liver pads, lottery tickets (31), Victoria Cross, etc., etc., all showing the universal use of the mails. Bees and other live insects, which are frequently sent in little barred boxes through the mail, are handled very gingerly—the business end of a bee is formidable even to a mail clerk. Snakes are said to be also sent by mail, but for this I cannot vouch, and some people are uncharitable enough to say that they only exist in the clerk's imagination.

Amongst the ills that mail clerks are particularly liable to are kidney diseases, caused no doubt by constant standing, for they scarcely ever sit down when the train is running, as it is almost impossible to write or sport in that position. The constant shake and jar of the train also aids those insidious diseases, and an old mail clerk with those organs in a perfect state of health is a rarity. On the other hand, though the cars are often over-heated and close, with plenty of dust from the piled mail bags, yet the doors having to be opened at every station ensures plenty of oxygen, and consequently diseases of the lungs are rare. In collisions the mail clerks usually suffer more than the trainmen. Cooped up in a closed car immediately next to the engine-tender, working away, entirely oblivious of the outlook or signals, they know naught of the impending crisis till the crash comes. In a collision on the Lake Shore Railway, near Cleveland, in 1889, the whole staff of six clerks were instantly killed, “crushed like rats in a trap,” as one of the morning dailies announced it. For a time after this accident the United States Post Office Department