

Postal Peculiarities.

BY GEO. W. HICKS.

Rat-tat. "Only the postman". And we open the letter and throw away the envelope without the glimpse of a thought of the wonderful machinery by which it has been carried—perhaps between three and four hundred miles—in ten hours or so at the cost of a few cents, a fact which certainly entitles the post office to a place pretty high up amongst the marvels of a modern civilization.

Let us carry our minds back to the time when the postman was not, and the letter-carrier, as a letter-carrier, was an unknown being; when letters and packets, unless they were sent by a special messenger, wandered about from carter to carter, and if they finally reached their destination at all, which was by no means to be looked upon as more than probable, took a most unconscionable long time about it.

Not till the period of the Wars of the Roses, in England, three hundred years ago, did our ancestors think the establishment of anything approaching to a post-office a necessity; but the conveyance of letters then began to be entrusted to the common carriers, whose heavy waggons splashed along leisurely through mud and mire; and if the reply to a letter, say to London, came back within a couple of months or so, the sender of the original missive thought himself an extremely lucky individual.

Wretched as was this method—or want of method—of letter-carrying, it was endured with only a moderate amount of grumbling; the richer classes sending their correspondence by private foot-runners, until in the sixteenth century foot and

horse posts began to be regularly employed, and continued to be the only means used for a couple of hundred years or thereabouts.

The postal service of those times was a very deliberate affair, with an entire absence of that haste without hurry, and speed without confusion, which characterise the post-office at present. An idea of its rapidity may be gathered from the fact that in 1635 the reigning monarch, Charles I., of unhappy memory, anxious to expedite the carrying of mails between London and Edinburgh, the most important post in the kingdom, issued a proclamation commanding his "postmaster for foreign parts to settle a running post or two" such was the almost studiously ambiguous wording of the document, "to run night and day between Edinburgh and London; to go thither and to come back again in six days". Nowadays the mails are whirled between the two capitals in something like nine hours.

But as late as the year 1715 foot-runners were the only letter-carriers in Scotland. The runner went what he considered a fair day's journey, and then quietly put up for the night and started again in the morning that is, if it didn't happen to rain hard, because if it did he frequently felt quite justified in not starting until he could do so without danger of a wetting.

Little wonder that many of the packets entrusted to the care of the Post Office bore startling and uncomplicated superscriptions, calculated, as the writers hoped with a feeling of half despondency, if such a seemingly contradiction of terms is allowable, to goad the lazy runners into a little extra exertion. Here is a specimen: "Be this letter delivered with haste! Ride, vil-