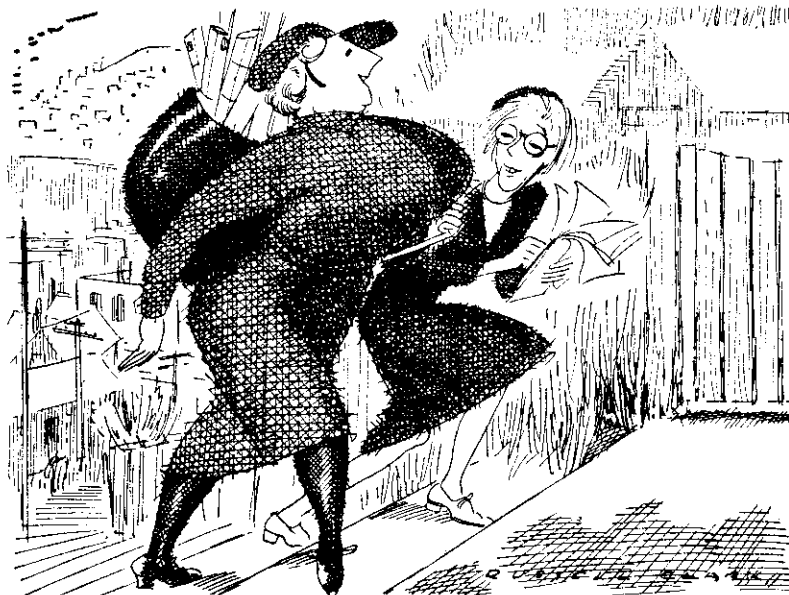


# A WALK WITH THE POSTWOMAN

"I T'S all in the wrist and the way you hold your mouth," my father used to say to me when I wanted to know how he did the hat-trick or holed in one. And that is the only explanation I can offer for the deft flicks by means of which the man at the counter sent each letter to its appropriate pigeon-hole. The women mail-sorters, I noticed, were apparently not holding their mouths at the right angle, for their flicks were less accurate and they hadn't got rhythm. But practice, I admit, is probably even more important for manual dexterity and female sorters are a recent innovation.

I was standing bewildered in the middle of the Postmen's Room in the main post office waiting to waylay one of the new woman postal deliverers and get from her a story about what it's like to be a postwoman. Little did I guess then that for an hour and a-half I should experience at first hand the joys and trials of a postwoman's day! A figure in uniform flashed past me. I had a confused impression of a stone-



"One thing about this bag," she remarks, "the farther you go the lighter it gets"

grey dress, a peaked cap of the W.W.S.A. pattern, and a large leather bag. Another figure flashed past on her way to the door. This time I noticed as well her silver whistle and rust-coloured tie. By this time I was sufficiently alert to waylay the third. She had no uniform, but the whistle and the large letter bag slung over her shoulder betrayed her calling. I caught up to her.

"I'm afraid I can't stop to talk," she explained. "It's half-past nine and I'm just starting on my round."

"I'll come with you," I rashly suggested.

We talked as we walked, a conversation interrupted every now and then by her disappearance into adjoining doorways. Hours were from seven in the morning to about three in the afternoon, she told me. The first two hours or so were spent in sorting mail for their own section and arranging it in delivery order. Then came a brief space for morning tea and then the girls prepared to set out on their morning delivery by about nine-thirty. "If there's a lot of mail you perhaps don't have time for morning tea," said Mrs. R—. "I didn't this morning."

## "I Thought I'd Die"

"Nine women are at present employed," she said, "and more are being taken on each day. Seven of us are married women," she went on. "My husband will be going into camp very shortly, and although when he's home I really have enough to do without working, I'll want to be doing something while he's away. So I might as well start now."

"How long have you been on?" I asked her.

"About two weeks. For the first day or two they sent a postman round with me to show me the ropes. It was quite

enjoyable because I didn't have anything to carry and I liked just walking round. But the first day I started on my own I thought I'd die. The bag-strap seemed to be cutting into my shoulder, and every time I stopped it seemed to slip round and hit me savagely on the other side. And as for getting in and out of lifts!"

"How heavy is it?" I asked. "Do let me try!"

I shifted the bag on to my own shoulder. It was heavy, but comfortable. We walked on.

"This isn't really my beat," explained Mrs. R—, dodging into another doorway and up a flight of stairs. "I've just taken it over from another girl and I don't really know my way round yet." I followed doggedly.

"Aren't you tired when you get home?" I asked.

"Not for long. We finish at three, and I go straight home and have a bath and feel as fresh as a daisy for the rest of the day. You've no idea how quickly you get used to it."

## The City is Better

Mrs. R— explained something of the system. So far girls are acting as postwomen only in the city and in a few residential areas near the city. "I prefer the city deliveries," she said. "For one thing you have to walk so much further in the suburbs, partly because lots of people still haven't letter-boxes at the gates and for another thing there are hills to climb. You don't get that in the city."

As if in response to my unspoken thought we stopped outside the lift. "Postal regulations—you're not allowed to walk up more than one flight of stairs," said Mrs. R—. "They look after us properly, you see. But I

usually walk down. Do you mind?"

We stopped at various offices on each floor, mostly small agencies, warehouses, or factories. "Most of the big firms have post-boxes," she said, "so we don't have to deliver to them."

## It's Easy to Get Lost

We turned into a dark corridor, proceeded along it for some yards and then plunged down a flight of stairs to the right. "It's awfully easy to get lost in some of these old buildings," she said. "When I first came round I used to take the wrong turnings and find myself in all sorts of unexpected places. But I'm better at it now. My worst fault is failing to deliver parcels along the route. You see you have all the letters carefully arranged in order, but occasionally you forget you've parcels as well and have to trek back several streets with them."

Up and down more stairs. Into the sunlight and back into the darkness of the doorways. Clang of lifts. Creak of office doors. Clatter of typewriters. I swung the bag to the other shoulder. My feet hurt. It was only half-past ten.

The only consolation, I reflected, is that you're such a popular person. Everywhere we went (and we went to a number of places) we were hailed with bright smiles and "Any letters for me to-day?" Even bills and circulars were welcomed with a smile. And I of course came in for my share of the delighted greetings.

"Got an assistant?" asked six lift-men, two typists and four manufacturing tailors. I would nod affirmatively and Mrs. R— would begin "Not exactly. You see—" or "Just for this morning, because—" but before the remark was finished we would be half way down the corridor and into the next office. A postwoman has no time to stop and gossip.

"And they'll probably all ask what's happened to me when you come round alone to-morrow," I remark apologetically. "The delivery will take you at least half an hour longer. When do you usually finish?"

"We're supposed to go to lunch about half-past eleven. Sometimes it's later. I'm going to do the residential area now. Are you coming?"

## The Farther the Lighter

I look at the clock. Almost eleven. If I hurry I'll be back at the office by morning tea time. And my feet do hurt.

"Think I'd better hurry back," I remark. "Thank you so much for letting me come round." I wangle one foot reminiscently.

She swings the bag expertly from my shoulder to hers. "One thing about this bag," she remarks, "the farther you go the lighter it gets."

"I hadn't noticed," I confess. I watch her practised stride as she swings up the street.

—M.B.

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