

PENNY-PLAIN AND TWO-PENCE-COLOURED

A CENTURY ago, when the head of the house wore a beard and his tribe went to church in a buggy, one of the finer of the fine arts was letter writing. A member of a family away on holiday was expected to write home frequently, describing his travels at length; and this he did, sometimes in copper-plate. Then, to the detestation of the old school, came a revolution in postal stationery—the postcard—which many feared would mean the death of good penmanship.

But worse was to come: the picture postcard, allowing for not much more room than a communiqué like *Your Mother and I stayed at this hotel before you were heard of. Home Sat.*, and worse still, the comic postcard with its gaudy picture of human misfortune which, for some reason or other, amuses the most amiable person. The scenic card has always maintained its position, but the comic variety declined in popularity over the years and has only reappeared here in strength in the last few months with all its florid colouring. There are the same old jokes, or variants of them, but now they wear a new look.

It was Heinrich Von Stephan, first Postmaster-General of the German Empire and chief promoter of the International Postal Union, who, in 1865, suggested the postcard as a convenient means of communication; but his proposal was not favoured, and it fell to Austria in 1869 to become the first user. A year later the idea was introduced officially in Great Britain. Postage was a halfpenny and no charge was

made above the value of the stamp. The English, normally suspicious of innovations, were fascinated. In the first year they accounted for 75,000,000 cards, and one of the most prolific users was Gladstone. In the 'nineties the issue of private cards received official sanction and the vogue increased until, with the expansion of the tourist business, the postcard became a "must" for everybody on holiday.

Mean, Small and Dear

By the end of the century 400,000,000 postcards were being used annually in England, and more than half of them were picture cards. But one man was dissatisfied. He was Sir John Henniker Heaton the English postal reformer, who liked neither the quality of the cards nor their price. Why, he asked, could not the British Post Office issue stronger and larger cards and sell them at face value "as in other civilised countries?" The British postcard, he said, was "one of the meanest, smallest and dearest" used anywhere. The cards did improve in size, but were not sold at face value until 1911. It was Heaton who pressed the claims of a type of card universally used today—the lettercard folded over and sealed at the gummed edges.

New Zealand was not far behind. As early as 1866 a resident of Invercargill had issued private postcards, and ten years later the New Zealand Post Office put out its first plain official card. Arguments started. As well as being a threat to good letter writing, said critics, a mere card was nothing short of an insult to the recipient. But whatever were their opinions they did not commit them to cardboard, for an official

report on the first issue asserted proudly that not a single card had contained obscene or libellous writing. The first official pictorial cards were issued in New Zealand in 1897, showing in chromolithography pictures of the Waikite Geyser, Mount Cook, Mount Egmont and Otira Gorge. Then, during the Boer War, there were scenes of troops in camp at Newtown Park, Wellington. Subsequent cards included views of the Dominion's main cities and towns.

That Little Blank Space

The primary object of the postcard is to provide the lazy correspondent with an easy means of fulfilling a slight social duty, but it can do funny things to people. The holiday-maker may have a score

of interesting things to say, but he can find hardly one when it comes to filling up that little blank space. As likely as not his news-flash will run, "Lots to tell you; car running beautifully" (as if you cared); and on the picture side will be an injured pedestrian complaining to a policeman, "I

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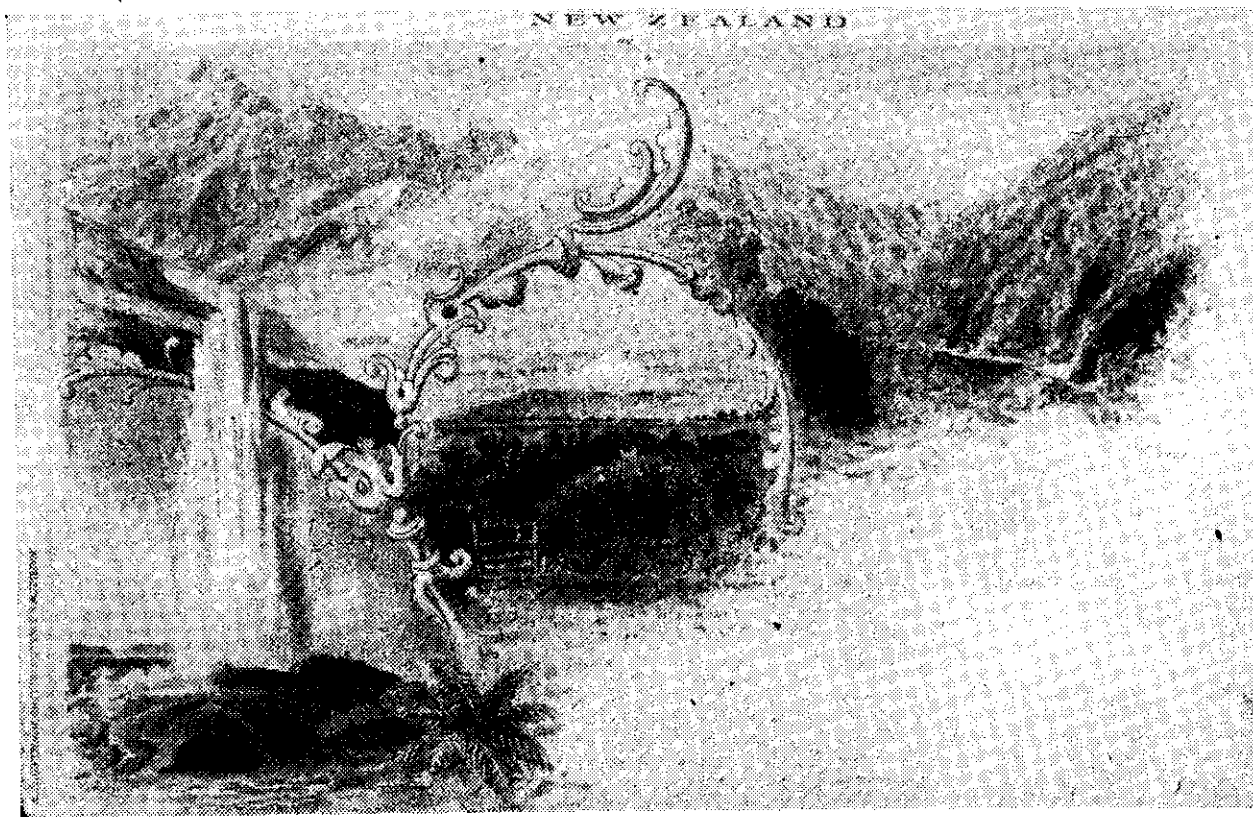


didn't get his number, but I'd know his darned laugh anywhere." And for outdoor characters, what more appropriate at the moment than a card depicting a bandy-legged batsman wondering, "What, me out leg-before? Don't be crazy!" It may at first sight seem incongruous to send to those left at home in the rain an attractive seaside scene and a wish that they were there to share it; but tactless as they are, such bulletins do show the stay-at-homes you are thinking of them. On the other hand, is it kind to suggest that their dear faces were brought to mind by a picture of the after end of a zoo elephant?

The better types of picture cards are historically valuable in showing changes in architecture and altered aspects of streets in many famous cities and towns. English varieties particularly are worth preserving, for they show such places as London, Coventry, Merseyside, and Glasgow before and after the bombs of the Second World War. Job lots are sometimes picked up at auction sales and among them may be found pictures of famous old buildings, well-known beauty spots, noted actors and actresses, politicians, soldiers, and sailors.

There is a reward for the collector of postcards surpassing the mere joy of possessing thousands of things a colleague may covet. Once firmly seated on his hobby-horse he acquires a title. A stamp collector becomes a philatelist and a cigarette card fan a cartophilist. But a postcard collector graduates into a *deltiologist*. Why? From the Greek *deltos*, meaning a writing tablet. And where was this staggering word coined? In the United States, of course.

—E.R.B.



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