

THE PRINCES OF THURN AND TAXIS

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To anyone with a liking for history there is a peculiar fascination in medieval titles of nobility. Again and again, in the space of a single name a whole career will be summed up. Albrecht the Bear, Markgraf von Brandenburg—Count of the March of Brandenburg—no need to tell there of the rough, hard fighter whose whole life was spent in holding the outposts of western Europe against the still pagan Prussians and eastern Europeans! Godfrey of Bouillon, that practical idealist, epitomizes the whole history of the First—and only successful—Crusade, when he changes his name to Godfrey of Jerusalem. Tancred of Hauteville (a Norman name) ruling in Sicily, Baldwin of Flanders in Constantinople, and a thousand others push and crowd each other to fasten on our interest.

And all these names are geographical. All, with no exception, point to some part, big or little, of the earth's surface that figured in the bearer's career. So necessary a part of things was this, according to the feudal scheme of thought, that even to the present day we cannot well think of a title of nobility without an earthy root. Edward Hyde, the right-hand man of Charles II in his exile, did not become Earl of the Restoration, but Earl of Clarendon. Our Latin neighbors sometimes amuse us by their street names, such as Fourth of September Street and Eleventh of July Street in Paris, and more Americans have walked on Fifth of May Street in Mexico City than

ever heard of the event which it commemorates. But even these nations have not thought of creating a Duke of April First or Count of October Thirty-first. Napoleon, though he was a product of the Revolution, seems never to have thought of making Ney Prince of the Russian Retreat, but disguises him from us as Duke of Elchingen. Across the channel, in contemporary days, Kitchener becomes Kitchener of Khartoum, and General French the Earl of Ypres. Admiral Beatty was a harder problem, what with the lack of towns and villages on the high seas. But there he is, Earl of the North Sea.

Two seeming exceptions to this are really proofs of its generality. The titles of pope and emperor never carried a territorial limit because both were necessarily world-wide. To the medievalist there could be no such thing as an emperor of India, an emperor of Russia, and so on, because the term itself meant the single, universal temporal ruler. True, the burden of such single-handed headship might be too great for one man to carry, and its responsibilities be assigned to one man in the west and another in the east, but though there was a western emperor and an eastern one, they jointly held a single office. Again, there might be various claimants to the office, the Roman emperor, the Byzantine emperor, and so forth, but these adjectives served merely to distinguish the various claimants to the single universal office. It was a recognition of all this that made the Germans in 1870, at the founding of the new *Reich*, so careful to give their sovereign the title of "German Emperor," not the impossible one of "Emperor of Germany." In exactly the same way there can be but one pope, even though for a long period there were several who simultaneously claimed the rank. Do not even those of us who are not Catholics recognize, in a vague sort of way, that somehow it is discourteous to our Catholic friends to speak of the "Pope of Rome"? Why? Because we are thereby in effect denying the universality of the office and limiting it to a single area.

In the face of such habits of thought it is more than surprising to find a European family of the later Middle Ages who not only raised themselves to greatness from plebeian origins—after all, there were more such than we are now likely to think—but whose achievements were so widespread as successfully to defy any local titles, so nearly all-European that they merely tied the princely title to a family name not at all suggestive of castle or town or place—as if today we might find a Duke of Jones or Earl of Smith—but that in a society to whom that would sound even stranger than it does to us. Truly a family that can so triumph even over habits of thought is worth a little closer examination by us. With this preface I introduce to you the Princes of Thurn and Taxis.

I shall not make a further mystery of who they were and what they did. They were the creators of the postal system as we know it today, the originators of the organized, systematic, regular transportation of mail nationally and internationally which we take so completely for granted, and the loss of which would have such an incalculable effect on all our lives. Not only were they the organizers of the first great post as a private commercial venture, but for nearly four hundred years, generation after generation, they kept the business going successfully, in wartime and in peace, until they finally retired, within the lifetime of many of our members. How many of our great commercial families will be able to say as much? Will a Ford or a Rockefeller or a Vanderbilt, in unbroken line, still loom high in 2336? Perhaps their persistent ability, generation after generation, is even more remarkable than their initial achievement!

Before I am ready to take up their story, however, I shall have to spend a considerable time in speaking of letter transportation as it existed before their day, so as to justify the sweeping claims I have made for them as the world's first mailmen. It is true that the great empires of the past, China, Rome, and Persia (or Iran, as I am now vainly trying to learn

to say), all had a highly developed courier system for government dispatches, but I am speaking of a system open to use by the public as well. Almost entirely these great systems of antiquity were exclusively for the use of the ruler, and may fairly—it seems to me—be excluded for our purposes. Only in organization did they give an example which it took the world many centuries to duplicate. Marco Polo writes in detail of the tremendous network of couriers that covered China and moved so smoothly and swiftly—the runners even wore girdles of bells to warn the next runner of their coming—that Genghis Khan, whom we are too apt to think of as an aimlessly wandering conqueror, could receive in twenty-four hours news of events occurring ten days' journey away. It reminds one of Prescott's statement that Montezuma was accustomed to receive fresh fish in Mexico City much less than a day after they were caught in the Gulf. Relays of fresh men, each running only a short distance, can produce surprising results.

The Persian post, as set up by Cyrus the Great, also reached a high standard of efficiency. Herodotus has described its couriers in a famous passage which has been carved on the façade of the New York City Post Office: "Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds." The main line of the Persian post ran from Susa to Sardis, nearly sixteen hundred miles, but it, too, was definitely only for the government. As there were 111 stations along the way, with extensive sleeping accommodations, private persons, however, must have made use of the same route.

I shall spend little more time on the Roman post. It is true that favored private persons were permitted to use it—the document evidencing this right was known as a diploma, by the way. But the Roman post was really no post at all in our sense of the term—it was, rather, an organized opportunity for persons to do their own traveling, by supplying them with sleeping quarters and relays of horses. After all, so long as the

sender of a letter picks his own messenger, in whom he puts his confidence and whom he expects personally to deliver the letter, with the so-called postal system merely making the journey easier, we do not yet have a system as we understand it. It is only when relays of messengers transmit the letters that are intrusted to the system that the modern post has begun. And for that reason if for no other the Roman system can be ruled out of the competition in which I have given first place to the Princes of Thurn and Taxis.

I should like to go with considerably more detail into the facilities which the Middle Ages had for the transmission of letters and spoken messages, as it is out of their very modest beginnings, rather than out of the more elaborate structures of ancient times, that our subject of the evening had its development. In fact, an absolutely fresh start had to be made, even though the last traces of the Roman *cursus publicus* lasted all the way down through the Carolingian era. By that later time it had really become little more than a specific tax by which local groups were bound to supply shelter and a quantity of supplies free to all travelers equipped with diplomas, the quantity being fixed according to their rank. For example, a bishop rated forty loaves, three lambs, three measures (size unknown to me) of fermented liquor, a young pig, three chickens, fifteen eggs, and the requisite hay for the horses. Lesser ranks received proportionately less; the common people, of course, simply did not travel. But these last Roman traces soon thereafter vanished, and, except for a single curious flare-up in the tenth century, in then barbarous Poland, under a progressive king, one Boleslaus the Bold, organized opportunity for travel and for letter transmission was wiped off the map.

There is less occasion to wonder at this than strikes one at first glance. Quite apart from the political confusion of the time, there simply was little reason to write letters and to have them sent. Letters, then as now, fall into three great

groups—commercial, social, and governmental. Commercial correspondence scarcely existed. Commerce was carried on by the merchant himself (or by a trusted agent), accompanying his goods and selling them directly at some center or fair. Such trafficking is independent of letter-writing. As to social correspondence, till the Crusades on the one hand and the rise of the universities on the other made traveling again a factor, it, too, was out of the picture. That reduces the scope to the governmental (including that between church organizations). But most political units were small and needed little domestic correspondence, while their foreign relations varied from war to obliviousness of each other, so that here, too, the scope of letter-writing was limited, even though large enough later to aid in setting the ball rolling once more. Added to all that were the high degree of illiteracy and (a factor apt to be overlooked) the almost prohibitive cost of writing material at a time when paper had not yet been discovered and parchment was the only thing available. Parenthetically, let me say that not only for this, but for other reasons as well, the letter as we know it today did not exist. Thus, envelopes were only devised in the 1830's, by a Brighton stationer, as a novelty for the resort trade at that fashionable seaside resort. Sealing wax and wafers as a means of closing sheets are only two hundred years older. The favorite medieval way of protecting privacy of writing was to fold up the sheet and tie it with a cord knotted in an extremely complex fashion which could be duplicated only by those initiated, and could only be opened by cutting. In other words, each set of correspondents had their own private Gordian knots.

But to return to my more immediate subject. The first important pickup in correspondence was the direct consequence of the spread of monasticism and the resultant rise of monasteries affiliated with, and almost branches of, some great central parent institution. The great monastery of Cluny, with its closely supervised filials, ranging all the way from Spain to

Poland and Hungary, is of course the prime illustration. The Cistercian group, with nearly a thousand establishments, was scarcely second. A really large volume of correspondence resulted, carried by lay employees on the short routes and by the monks themselves on the long ones. Very much the same development took place so far as the semireligious military orders were concerned, notably in the case of the Teutonic Knights, whose charge was to defend Christian western Europe from the pagan hordes of the northeast, and whose insignia of a black Maltese cross is the origin of the modern German military order of the Iron Cross. The center of the system was at the headquarters of the order, the great Marienburg in East Prussia, to and from which letters went in all directions, with accurate books kept at every post showing exactly what passed through its hands.

All this, however, did comparatively little to meet the needs of laymen, who were slowly becoming more important as letter-writers. Various means—at first entirely sporadic—were provided for them. I shall spend no time on such oddities as the trained deer which, so it is said, carried letters over a short route in Franconia. But the more usual methods were, if anything, even less dependable. Pilgrims and mendicant monks were made use of, and probably made this sort of service the means of financing their wanderings. How and when their irregular movements would lead them to the addressees was always most uncertain, and it is said that their letters were sometimes months, and even years, on the way, if they arrived at all. Itinerant merchants and peddlers, where available, were more dependable, being far more certain of where they were going and, as they came back year after year to the same customers, much more responsible.

Of course, both of these agencies were wholly unorganized. The first faint traces of organized letter-carrying for laymen appeared in two utterly different forms, one for urban and the other for rural users. For the former the cities themselves, as

they slowly rose to greater size and power, set up a limited courier service, or the more powerful and wealthy guilds within them did so. This type of service, of course, took a great step forward with the rise of leagues of cities, of which the famous Hanseatic League was by far the most important. By the end of the thirteenth century this league had a more-or-less definite and regular service between its own cities and others as diverse as London, Bergen, Nijni Novgorod, and even Venice. The great trouble with many of these city messengers was their unreliability and even dishonesty. A German writer as late as the sixteenth century, far beyond the period that now concerns us, still complains, in quaint German which I wish I could render into equivalent English, "As for the messengers, besides many other misprisions, they do open the letters and counterfeit the seals. Nay more, they open the packages and take the money therefrom, the which they do dissipate in gaming and drinking. And, for clearing themselves, they say that they were set upon by evildoers or that they fell sore sick and so were plundered, to the end that by such lies and falsehoods yet more money is given them to the healing of their pretended griefs. And when once such a thing has come to pass, then never more will they turn from their evil ways, but wickedly persist in them until perchance they are found out." Truly not a very cheery picture of intercity posts. Meanwhile the rural regions, at least in Germany, were developing a curious post of their own, the butchers' post. The butchers were men of substance who traveled over wide areas in their cattle-buying expeditions. Letter-carrying, while at first an informal matter, finally became an acknowledged duty on their part—so much so that it was recognized by law and their movements, and even hours of departure from village to village, definitely regulated. These wandering butchers (or, rather, cattle dealers) were in the habit of carrying a bugle or horn with which to announce their arrival to buy cattle, and this was the origin

of the post horn, which to this day is the symbol on continental Europe of the postal organization.

I have left to the last the most important medieval mechanism for letter-carrying, the so-called "university post." The gradual growth of centers of teaching and learning, and with them of groups of students coming from far and near, marks just about the first large-scale lay cause for letter-writing, with the possible exception of the Crusades, as it was the first cause to take fairly large numbers of persons an appreciable distance from home for an extended time. Both for personal messages and (perhaps even more) for the transmission of funds from home, student correspondence was, for those days, of great and growing volume. So much so, in fact, that the university organizations among their very first corporate activities began to provide regular messenger service for the various groups or "nations" of students. Thus, at the University of Vienna there was a Prague messenger, a Breslau messenger, a Linz one, and so on. The appreciation of the value of education, much more widely felt than we are apt to give that age credit for, led to favoring any university agency, and the messengers were not overlooked. As early as 1158 the Emperor Frederick Barbarossa gave them safe conducts for their journeys in the Empire, and in France Louis X followed the precedent some century and a half later. In those troubled times this was a tremendous advantage over other messengers. No wonder, then, that their services were soon in great demand by nonuniversity users as well. Horses and even wagons partly replaced foot messengers, and a small freight and passenger business was actually built up, particularly by the University of Paris. This business must have reached a scope where it was very profitable, because one of the most telling blows which Henry III delivered at the University of Paris as a result of its friendship for the Guise family consisted in his forbidding them any longer to engage in nonuniversity business.

This, so far as I know, exhausts the list of medieval agencies of mail, parcel, and express transportation. Now for a look at the means and methods used by these agencies. At first and for a long time, the messengers traveled almost entirely on foot. At first, too, curiously enough the letter was carried in a cleft stick, but later as more than one letter was taken the more obvious leather bag came in. The only other piece of regular equipment was a long staff with a sharp metal point—a spear against enemies, a pole with which to vault small streams, a support when crossing a river on some log felled across it. Perhaps, at a later date, one should include the horn as “standard equipment,” at least for the butchers. Fabulous stories, which I shall not burden you with, are told of the speed and regularity of these hikers in the days largely predating even rudimentary roads. One venerable writer says that it was the custom of the couriers somewhere or other—perhaps wisely he does not say where—to take their naps with lighted wicks fastened to their ankles to insure waking at the proper hour. And the Turks seem certainly to have had the amiable custom of removing the spleen from men destined to serve as messengers, in the belief that this would render them more speedy. I am rather curious to learn from our medical members whether this belief would seem a reasonable one to them!

Other means of transport were, of course, horseback, and river navigation. There are two church towers in Frankfurt from which trumpet blasts announced all approaching arrivals and departures of boats, and other rivers showed an equally regular traffic. In Germany the mounted messengers, through superstition, followed a practice which I shall have occasion again to refer to later, in another connection. It was widely believed that a badger skin was a talisman against witches and evildoers, somewhat like a rabbit's foot today, and no horseman considered himself safe unless a bit of badger skin showed on his horse's fetlock, just as in Turkey today every donkey

carries a blue bead there. Every mounted messenger, therefore, had to have his bit of badger skin showing prominently.

Meanwhile wagon transport made very slow progress, although the growing freight and passenger business of the messengers was a constant pressure to increase their cargo-carrying capacity. Mainly this slight use of wagons was due to the incredibly bad condition or entire nonexistence of roads. Not only was there no agency to build or maintain them; one also rather suspects that there may often have been a direct wish to keep them bad in those places that maintained the law of droppage, whereby anything that fell from the traveler to the ground belonged to the local lord or baron. A few overturned wagons in judiciously maintained bad spots could yield even more profit than a successful speed trap in the age of motors. At any rate, whatever the reason, the roads were execrable. An old woodcut is still in existence showing Pope John XXIII dumped out of his wagon as it was completely upset while he was crossing the Arlberg, on his way to the Council of Constance in 1415. It was not all the fault of the roads, though. The wagons themselves were almost unbelievably clumsy objects, as well as wholly comfortless. Roofs over the wagon body only date back to the fifteenth century. Until that time, too, the body was hung to the chassis by chains, permitting swaying but no springing motion at all. At about that time a great improvement was made in hanging the wagon body by leather straps, which at least had some slight give to them. This invention hails from Hungary, and there is credited to the town of Cotechis. It is an open question whether the resultant vehicles, known all through Europe as "coaches," have gained their name from the town or from "concha," a shell. Incidentally, the Earl of Bedford, who was English ambassador to the court of Philip II at Brussels, was so impressed by these vehicles that he said they were called "couches" because of their extreme comfort—a fine case of false etymology to add to Mr. Smally's collection!

As if these obstacles to medieval vehicular transportation were not enough, it seems also to have suffered, for some reason or other, from an unfavorable public opinion. It was definitely debasing for people of birth to use a wagon, while in the cities the circulation of wagons in the streets was looked on as a nuisance hardly to be tolerated. In evidence I cite an instance which even lies several centuries this side of the Middle Ages. In 1635 Charles I provided by royal command substantially as follows: "His Majesty hath taken notice of the great increase in coaches, in our city of London, to the dis-ease of the King, the Queen, and noble folk, whereby the streets and highways are made impassible and dangerous, and the price of hay and fodder is unseemly enhanced, and we have seen fit, with the advice of our Privy Council, to make known our royal will in the matter. We command, therefore, that no one shall hereafter use a coach, unless he be making a voyage of not less than three miles without the city, and no one shall ride therein unless the owner thereof shall keep at his own expense and cost four good horses, fit at the king's need to serve him." Yet despite all these handicaps wagons, and even whole caravans of them, did travel along in the charge of the messenger, who, as I have said before, carried on at least as much of a freight- and passenger-carrying function as a postal one. If wagons were not used, pack horses were, and some curious instances have come down to us of the articles that they or the messenger carried. A live wild boar is mentioned in one place. In another a fine hat is sent from a city to a noble in his rural castle and the messenger is required to wear it, as less dangerous to it than packing would be. But the most peculiar load that I know of, and not too rare a one, was one of the quarters of the body of a man executed for treason, for display in some other part of the domain. At any rate, whatever the load might be, by the end of the Middle Ages we have come far from the rare, sporadic communications of the beginning of that period. Indeed, in the Near East an

Oriental postmaster even compiled a postal guide for the Caliph's domain, and was able to list no less than 930 post stations in that more advanced region.

This lengthy introduction at last carries me to the eve of the appearance on the stage of the family of Thurn and Taxis, and has shown, I hope, how ready the world in general was for their services. Governmental mail, which I neglected in my earlier comments, was hardly better served than was private mail. True, there was probably in every country some sketchy royal courier system. In England it dated back to King John, and expanded slightly thereafter, but even when Henry VIII appointed Brian Tuke as the first "Master of the Postes" it was still a shaky little affair. Meanwhile a considerably more efficient organization had been set up in France by that most practical of monarchs, Louis XI, with regular routes and 230 couriers. This, however, was far in advance of other countries. Yet with the Renaissance a tremendous increase in governmental mail, especially foreign, took place. International relations became closer and more intimate; the period of alternating war and comparative obliviousness was over, and for the first time permanent embassies were set up, in place of mere special missions for specific purposes. All this, but especially the last factor, led to an enormous jump in letter-writing. It is known, for example, that the Venetian ambassador to Rome in 1504 wrote no less than 349 letters to his home government. While this may have been unusual, others no doubt were nearly as active.

All these developments must have been particularly true for the House of Hapsburg, which was just then beginning that sudden period of expansion that soon made it master of half of Europe. A sentence or two of historical review will, I hope, be permitted me. The Emperor Maximilian, by his marriage with the heiress of Charles the Bold, Duke of Burgundy, added to all of what is now Austria much of what is now Alsace and Lorraine and all of the present Belgium and Hol-

land. Their son, Philip, by marrying the insane daughter of Ferdinand and Isabella, put all of Spain and its colonies as well as the kingdom of Naples into the family fortune; and the next generation, by finding itself another heiress, added Hungary and Bohemia. Four wholly separate areas, yet at the beginning of the expansion period twenty couriers seem to have been the entire message-bearing machinery. No wonder that the door was opened wide to the organizing genius of our family of Thurn and Taxis. It was a combination of opportunity and ability not so very unlike the combination of Henry Ford and the modern motor. And now I seem really to have reached the birth of the hero of my biography—though, like Tristram Shandy, he has had to wait until the second half of the paper to be brought on the scene. To begin with, what was the origin of the family and of the peculiar name in which it rejoiced? They were Italians from the neighborhood of Bergamo, and were from a community of pure Lombard—that is, Germanic—blood. In view of their present migration to Germany and their quick adaptation to its ways it is a peculiar circumstance, which may or may not have any significance, that their home village was the very last to abandon the Lombard law in favor of Roman—and that, too, only in the first half of the fifteenth century, some thousand years after the Lombard migration and only fifty years or so before the events of which I am now speaking. With the same specialization of occupation so often true of the Middle Ages, the inhabitants of Bergamo were peculiarly drawn to the work of courier, and a high proportion of the couriers all through Italy were “Bergamaschi.” Of these, many belonged to the Tasso family, the Tassi in plural form. It is probable that Torquato Tasso came of the same group. The word “tasso” in Italian means badger, and both the word and the name are of German origin. The German equivalent is “dachs,” a word known to all of you through the lowly dachshund, a badger hound. And the connection between “dachs” and “tasso” was so clear to their

contemporaries that one of the early members of the family is indiscriminately referred to as Janetto Tassi and Johanne Dachs. I might add that the change in spelling from *ss* to *x* was, it seems, the uniform practice in Venice, in whose service many of the family were couriers. One more thing regarding the family name of Tassi, or Badger. You will recall that I referred earlier to the custom of couriers to carry a badger-skin talisman. By this time the superstition was rapidly dying out, and instead, by an amusing and yet obvious mistake, all couriers were soon thought to be carrying the emblem (I almost might say the trade mark) of our Tassi family. Undoubtedly this coincidence was a factor in the quick spread of their fame and power.

Now for the first part of the name, "Thurn." The Tassi were so numerous that they were more of a clan than a family. Hence a tendency to adopt a further surname. Thus the descendants of one Alexander, or Sandro, Tasso, who became postmasters of the Pope's territories, dropped the Tassi entirely and used Sandri as the family name. The particular group that I am concerned with hailed from a village, Torre di Cornello, and called themselves the Torriani. It was simply a translation plus a small shift in pronunciation that converted this into Thurn. And there we have that curious combination of Thurn and Taxis. Thus the family, for all its later importance, was not at that time noble—in fact, its patent of nobility is definitely dated at 1512, when it was accorded a shield with a post horn on it as its coat of arms—about as subtle as if Mr. William Wrigley were accorded one of a stick of gum crossed by a baseball bat. All this did not prevent flatterers, less than two hundred years later, from discovering the genealogy of the family as far back as the fourth century, an achievement surpassed only by those who showed the authentic descent of the unfortunate Haile Selassie straight from King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. In fact, one of the German writers permits himself a ponderous but not wholly

atrocious pun when he refers to this as the prehistory of post-history.

The first of the family to reach the imperial court was one Roger Taxis, who became master of the hunt there in the first half of the fifteenth century. He has been given credit for organizing a temporary courier service across Styria and Tyrol, which may or may not be true. It is not unlikely, as he had before him the example of the Roman branch of the family—the Sandri—who were already rapidly getting wealthy from the rent of post horses to travelers, and who soon shifted their main career to banking, thanks to the foreign-exchange dealings that their postal contact with foreigners made necessary. But the more-or-less legendary Roger certainly accomplished nothing permanent, and it is only with his grandsons, or supposed grandsons, Janetto and Francesco, that our story begins.

Before their time, as I said earlier, there was already some slight organization in the shape of periodical messenger service from city to city. There might even be some chance to make journeying simpler by having relays of horses for rent on a so-called "post route." But in any case it meant that one messenger had to make the whole journey, and the sender placed his trust in him personally, not in any succession of messengers. The big contribution of the Tassi was to set up for the first time on a large scale a system of relays, not only of horses but also of couriers, so that letters were actually intrusted to a postal system rather than to a particular carrier. In its way it was a tremendous step forward, and yet, as in every great invention, it is hard to say that so-and-so was the inventor, as here, too, there were more-or-less important predecessors. The most notable one was in what is now northern Spain, where regular couriers traveled fixed routes and put up at designated inns. Those having letters could leave them at that inn—a convenience to both sides, as it meant a definite place of deposit for the letter-writer and a means of getting

business for himself for the courier, even while he was out on the road. In addition it also necessarily meant a fixed, predetermined tariff for letters. And, incidentally, it gradually made postal functionaries of the innkeepers—real postmasters. The Barcelona postmaster, by the way, at this period hit on the idea of extra care for an extra fee—the registered letter.

Experiments like this were undoubtedly known to these early Tassi, but at first meant little to their activity. They were themselves merely couriers, not at all above their associates, except perhaps in their energy and dependability, which, time after time, got them the long or dangerous rides. But two circumstances slowly set the brothers Janetto and Francesco—particularly the older, Janetto—above the others. In the first place, he showed a willingness—even an eagerness—to take on a job energetically avoided by the others, the rather risky one of taking out and distributing the periodical pay for the couriers. One wonders if he foresaw that even in his own lifetime these others would thereby gradually become his employees, taking orders from him, with a pleasant little differential between the money which was allowed him and what he had to pay out in wages, and, most important, with the whole organization belonging personally to him. The other fact that made Janetto Tassi not merely another courier was his widely scattered family, which had all the close loyalty for far-scattered cousins that was characteristic of the big Italian families of the Renaissance. It meant very much in his value as a master courier that he had relatives who would be sure to aid his men in Venice, in Rome, and even by now in parts of Spain. No wonder that on December 11, 1489, "Johannet Dax" was formally named "high postmaster" and the family's career definitely launched. He carried on for sixteen years and in 1505 was succeeded by an even abler nephew, Johann Baptista, leaving him free to devote all his time to the task of trying to make the Emperor pay the sums coming due to the Taxis organization, an illuminating commentary on the im-

perial finances. It must have soured his loyalty. At any rate when the Emperor declared war on Venice he took sides with the latter, a poor guess, as he was made prisoner in 1509, and thereafter rode the roads no more, but continued a prisoner till his death in 1517.

It is a proof of the ability of the family that this disloyalty did not interrupt, even for a moment, the continued advance of the other members. So in 1507, Gabriel, apparently an uncle, who was postmaster of the imperial capital, Innsbruck, was charged with organizing a regular service to Ravenna, Venice, and Italy in general, while Johann Baptista, the nephew, whom I have already referred to, continued as high postmaster. Meanwhile I have mentioned nothing but the name of Johannet's brother, Francesco, who after a slow start was destined to be the greatest of the whole family. His opportunity came to him with the sudden expansion of the Hapsburgs from being only rulers of Austria and Tyrol to lordship also over all the Netherlands, Naples, and much of Spain. Here was a golden chance for a postal executive, and he took it. So in 1505 Francesco, or Francis, as he now becomes, made a contract with Philip I in Brussels, by which for 12,000 livres yearly he was to carry the imperial mail on the first international mail routes, one to Innsbruck, one to France, and one to Spain. Detailed schedules were fixed on—Innsbruck in five and one-half days in summer and six and one-half days in winter, forty-four hours to Paris, twelve days to Toledo, fifteen to Granada, and so on, all pretty fast going and destined to be considerably honored in the breach. But then, the imperial payments also fell almost at once into arrears. In 1516 the contract was renewed with Charles, who later became the Emperor Charles V, and the postal lines were extended to Italy and to Vienna, the latter destined to become the greatest postal route in Europe. When Francis died, the following year, his nephew, Johann Baptista, who as I have said before was already high postmaster of the Emperor in Innsbruck,

became head of the whole imperial system, and the prosperity and greatness of the family were in full swing. The ornaments of that greatness followed in gradual course. In 1543 the head of the family received the title of "Imperial Postmaster General," and in 1574 the title was made hereditary. In 1615 Lamoral von Taxis was made a count, and in 1695 the family became princes of the Empire, with the post as their fief, precisely as the other nobility held landed fiefs.

To return to the early 1500's. Other nephews of Francesco were hardly less capable than their brother, Johann Baptista, in helping the family forward. David became postmaster of the Republic of Venice, Simon held the same office under the Duke of Milan, and Maffeo founded a brilliantly successful branch of the family in Spain. I shall sketch out the Spanish highlights before getting on with the main branch. The family had a hard start of it, as aliens in that extremely proud land, and needed nearly two hundred years to get full control of the domestic mails. They did better in the foreign field, setting up an Italian service in the middle 1500's, extending it to Germany only a little later, and by the seventeenth century having a bi-weekly service to Holland and England. Finally, in 1706, the government bought out their monopoly and they disappear from my knowledge.

Returning to the German establishment—just what sort of service was it furnishing at this time? I have mentioned some of the ideal time schedules, but they mean little unless one is closely acquainted with European geography. Actually letters seem to have moved at the speed of about ninety miles a day. Each relay was ideally about twenty-two miles long. Normally they ended in a village, not in a town, to avoid the problem of town gates shut at sundown. Service was on horseback where possible, but frequently was by foot messenger. Each mail bag was supposed to be accompanied by a time sheet, on which was to be written the name of each successive carrier and exactly where and when he had received the bag, as a

check on the diligence of all concerned. A number of these time sheets survive, the oldest going back to 1496. They are frequently quaint, to say the least. A typical one begins with the exhortation, "This letter is to be carried day and night, not speedily, nay rather like the lightning, under pain of a thousand lashes. Make haste, haste, haste, haste, haste, haste, haste." The number of times that the word "haste" was repeated and the number of lashes threatened seem—I say it in all seriousness—to have indicated just how much hurry there really was. Occasionally a humorous touch creeps in. Thus, one bears a memorandum on it, reading, "Dear Master Postmaster, I pray you send me money, for I have none at all, no not even for the horse's feed. I do owe the innkeeper, who sayeth he will lay hold on my horse against that I do not pay him. I beg you, help me speedily." As a matter of fact financial matters were not running perfectly smoothly and the imperial subsidies were in consistent default—a circumstance that turned out to be a blessing in disguise, because it turned the attention of the Taxis more and more to private business as a source of revenue. Up to now the post had been solely for the benefit of the government. After all, it (theoretically at least) paid all the expenses. No wonder it expected to be sole beneficiary. But for a long time a good deal of private mail had in fact been carried—who was to know, or stop, it? And this proved increasingly profitable. So much so that our keen business men offered to surrender a rather imaginary subsidy and in return got permission to transport private letters and even passengers on their relay system, provided this did not interfere with government mail. As a further protection they were granted a monopoly. Naturally this last feature trod heavily on the dignified toes of many jealous local princelings, and the more profitable the monopoly proved itself the more these princelings resented it. In fact, the very success of the Thurn and Taxis post almost at once began to raise a rich crop of enemies. Francis with characteristic foresight had done every-

thing he could to conciliate local pride, but some of his successors were not so wise. Their frequent employment of foreigners stroked local patriotism the wrong way, and the sight of rich profits going elsewhere capped the climax. Rival systems were set up, and the meeting of two post riders was often the signal for a grand fight. The Emperor consistently took the side of his imperial postmaster—and no wonder, for by this time the Thurn and Taxis post was yielding such large profits that the tables had been completely turned, and it was paying him large sums yearly for the privilege of holding the monopoly. (The Netherlands concession alone finally cost the family 135,000 gulden annually!) Even so, the Count of Thurn and Taxis in a careless moment openly described the imperial post as a “well into which all streams flow.” As a result jealousy of the post and reciprocal determinations to set up and to suppress rival posts actually were high among the many causes that finally in 1618 led to the most terrible war of all history—at least, up to now—the Thirty Years’ War.

Even during that fearful time service was somehow or other kept up, though individual lines might be closed weeks or even months at a time. It is said that almost unbelievable stories of exciting adventure by the post riders of this period are buried away in the Austrian postal archives. At any rate the Thurn and Taxis post survived, and was even so signal a help to the imperial side that Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden, then leader of the Protestant side, in 1636 imitated it by founding the royal Swedish post, the oldest complete governmental postal establishment in existence, which this year celebrated its three hundredth birthday with a good deal of pomp and ceremony.

With the return of peace in 1648 better times came back and the family’s fortunes swept into new highs, to use the current stock-market phraseology. A new and minor, but agreeable, source of income was turned up—the newspaper, weekly usually but sometimes daily. It was a natural thing for this

to be issued by the local postmaster, as the first receiver of news. Gradually this became actually his prerogative, and ultimately the Taxis monopoly was enlarged to include the sole right to publish newspapers in a number of large cities, including Hamburg and Frankfurt.

But in other directions things were not so rosy. The old difficulty of local jealousy and rivalry came back with a vengeance. This was specially true in the Low Countries, where the business was also specially profitable. The cities set up their own competing messenger services and answered laws forbidding them by regularly beating up the Taxis messengers. Mob violence met government interference until things reached a point where in 1659 a minor little war was actually declared by the Empire on Antwerp, an army sent out and the city taken over, with the resultant hanging of five of the city party and a promise to behave in the future—a promise that was none too well kept at that. Misfortunes come in threes, as we all know, and it seems to be equally true in the case of imperial postmen. After the war the Saxon government refused to renew their franchise, and in total disregard of imperial commands threw the Thurn and Taxis organization out bodily. As Saxony was not so easily awed as Antwerp was, they stayed out permanently. And—third disappointment—a rival family laid claim to the Austrian posts. A twenty-five-year-long lawsuit followed, and ended in a partial victory for the rivals.

Efforts to counterbalance these losses by moving into new territory were made, particularly into Brandenburg, which was just then expanding rapidly and was soon to become a kingdom under the name of Prussia. But Brandenburg resisted appeals and commands alike, greatly preferring to maintain its own new and very successful post. When Prussia was involved in the Seven Years' War, from 1746 to 1753, the persistent Prince of Taxis renewed his efforts, but with no more luck than before. Even easy-going, conservative Bavaria was

occasionally recalcitrant, notably in the last part of the eighteenth century, when for a term of twenty years it kept the Taxis post out. Do not, however, waste too much sympathy on the princes. By 1800 the family's business had grown so large that, even with these disappointments, their yearly income was estimated at 1,000,000 florins, or about \$500,000.

Just the same the French Revolution was a terrific blow for the old establishment. Whatever territory the French conquered seemed lost to it forever, and with Napoleon's Confederation of the Rhine, in 1806, it was definitely shut out of almost all of Germany. Some of the expulsions, it is true, were accompanied by compensation in part (especially in the form of landed estates). But the abdication of Napoleon brought the irrepressible family right back into the thick of things, and again it was the main postal factor in Central Europe—not quite so hale as once, but still doing very well. By the settlement of 1814 the Low Countries were lost to it forever, and such of the many little sovereignties making up Germany as wished to do so were permitted to buy out the Thurn and Taxis monopoly in their own territories. But many, particularly of the smaller ones, elected not to do so, and the business enterprise entered its fourth century in a still thriving condition.

In fact, the age just beginning was in many respects the golden age of the Taxis post, and perhaps its most colorful one. It was the age of the great yellow stage coach, thundering along the country roads behind six galloping horses, the postillion's horn sounding its coming. And what a figure of romance the postillion was to his generation! Reams of poetry were written about him—"Der Postillion von Longjumeau":

Ho, ho, ho, ho, so schön und froh,

Der Postillion von Longjumeau.

may have a familiar ring to some of you even today. And to the small boy of the time he must have been a combination of the locomotive engineer and the aviator of today. A postillion

serving the main route had autocratic authority over the younger men on the side roads branching off his route. He was a man of respect and importance in his community, often its only link with the outer world, and locally reputed to be on familiar terms with the great people everywhere. There was even, curiously enough, considerable basis for this repute. One of them, one Wolfert of Carlsbad, kept an autograph album which showed, among a host of others, the signatures of King Wilhelm of Prussia (later on the first German Emperor), King Otto of Greece, the Emperor of Brazil, Bismarck, Gortschakoff, Benedetti, Grammont, Lord Russell, Moltke, and Nesselrode, to name only a few. The most famous of them all, Peter of Esch, or "Eschenpeter," on one occasion was transporting the Grand Duke Constantine of Russia, who had just proved his vile temper by his conduct as governor of Poland. When Eschenpeter drove too slowly to suit his passenger the latter commanded him, at the muzzle of a pistol, to increase his speed. Eschenpeter obeyed. The speed again slackened; again the threat, whereupon the redoubtable postillion announced that henceforth he was going to walk his horses. The passenger fired point blank; Eschenpeter was slightly wounded, and at once proceeded to give the Grand Duke and his aide-de-camp so thorough a beating as to put them both in the hospital for two months. And nothing—I might add—was done about it to the redoubtable Eschenpeter!

But I have digressed long enough—all this does not directly concern the Thurn and Taxis family. The end of the story was finally coming for them, and that, too, from a cause that seemed a mere nothing compared to the storms that they had weathered—the Six Weeks' War in 1866, in which Prussia finally crushed forever Austria's leadership in Germany. With Austria was bound to go its satellite, the Taxis post. Soon after the brief war Prussia organized the North German Confederation, under its own leadership. This confederation set up its own postal service, and Prussia, as a sort of practical

fairly godmother, decided to make the way clear for it by buying out the age-old organization once and for all. So, on January 28, 1867, the agreement was signed, and on July 1 of the same year everything was taken over, lock, stock, and barrel, against a payment to the then Prince of 9,000,000 marks. And with it the world's oldest and most successful business family at last retired.

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