

The Dead Letter Office.

As I was sitting the other day in my study, lost to the world in delightful recollection of my recent ramble in the forest-covered mountains of Europe, the shrill whistle of the postman was heard, and a moment later my attention was concentrated on a curiously-marked letter which had been dropped into my hand. It was a letter written and dispatched by a friend in America while I was exploring the forest of Thuringia, and after crossing the ocean it had followed me from city to city, and country to country, only to return again across the stormy waters, bearing on its envelope the postmarks of many principalities. Close beside that of old Munich, famous for its act and its beer, crowded a curious triangular post-mark, which I at once recognized as that of the Dead Letter Office. "Ah!" I said, "Now I know how that letter was returned to me, and through what final channel it arrived at its destination. And yet, this associate with an institution beside which I have lived all my life and have never visited."

The next time I was in town, I ran into the Dead Letter Office and there are a few of the novel attractions I saw there. One hundred clerks or more were busily engaged at various desks handling and disposing of thousands of letters which for one reason or another had been turned over to this department. Some were occupied in attempting to read the odd handwriting shown on the ill-fated letter. There they would take up, look at steadily, turn over, show around, hold up one end, and in most cases all of these evolutions resulted in successful deciphering. Then, when a record had been made of the truant letter, they would be dispatched with all haste to the point whither they ought to go. Other clerks, finding no clue on the outside of the letter as to whom it was intended for or from whom it came, quickly opened the missive and as quickly sought out inner address. Thousands of such letters as these must be opened here every year; and strange are the romances of love and the sorrowful tale of misfortune which now and then greet the eye of the examining clerk.

And speaking of their faulty addresses, which result in far too many letters wandering adrift, supplied both for the sender and the receiver, and because of the monumental stupidity of the sender—the inscription of an eastern hayseed who wrote—"FOR MY SON OUT WEST, HE DRIVES RED OXEN AND THE RAILROAD GOES BY THEM"—is probably unique. No help could be offered this aged offender by the Dead Letter Office, but it is almost surprising that no solution was forthcoming, considering the extraordinary accomplishments of these sharpwitted, clear-sighted officials. Not long ago a letter reached its proper destination through the Dead Letter Office addressed merely "Mr. James Gunn, Power-loom Shuttle-maker, Mass., America," and a letter sent from Boston—Boston, the Hub, and the city of culture!—bearing the simple address, "Dr. Washburn, Roberts College," was properly forwarded to Constantinople. Inscriptions in Greek, Syriac, Chinese, Bohemian and "modern English," both amuse and worry these long-suffering servants of the public.

Naturally, many of the 7,000,000 letters and packages turning up annually in the Dead Letter Office have brought with them no clue to the owners, while they have contained articles of more or less value and curiosity. Some of these have been retained by the department and now constitute the museum of the institution. Here for instance, is a New Testament in Chinese, and near by a blood-stained knife used by Apaches in killing a western mail-carrier. Then, there is a copy of the Lord's Prayer in the fifty-four languages, and chips from the floor of the room in which Jesse James was brought to bay and killed. Coins of great historic value crowd the shelves as spread out for display, while stuffed birds, sea-shells, Easter eggs, bowie knives, and other curios, including of course, numerous specimens of minerals, are also to be seen.

The exhibits comprise articles of both great and little value; hand-painted miniatures on ivory, a crucifix of gold and carnelian, a sapphire ring set with diamonds, and another of moss-agate. All bid for attention with boxes of wedding cake, false teeth, bottles of salad oil, a coffee pot, and numerous dolls, a hat-box, and a coat suggestive strongly of Joseph's little garment of many colors. Kid gloves and other articles of feminine apparel,

strapped in newspapers and various other covers calculated to aid some fair-sex smugglers, give one a suggestion of the methods resorted to by those who professionally defraud the Government, or who are spasmodically tempted to become dishonest.

One of the most interesting collections in the museum, not displayed to view, but safely secreted and recorded on the office books, is the fund of hard cash, collected from several sources. Some of it is found in letters which cannot be returned to the sender nor forwarded to those for whom they were intended: more comes loose to the office in packages of a few cents at a time. This "loose money," as it is called, was originally secured in letters and packages, but has been shaken out by the violent handling received while being transferred from the mail-bag crane at way stations to rapidly-moving trains. Thus it is a common experience for the mail laddies hustling about in our speeding postal cars to thrust their hands into the canvass pouches and find there a number of rolling coppers.

No other division of the Postal Department serves the people better than the Dead Letter Office. No other branch is more interesting in its management and methods of procedure. No other department is more frequently inspected by those who visit Washington. And yet, for all this, but little is known of the Dead Letter Office by the public at large.

A E. Kilpatrick, of Fillmore, Cal., had the misfortune to have his leg caught between a cart and a stone and badly bruised. Ordinarily he would have been laid up for two or three weeks, but says: "After using one bottle of Chamberlain's Pain Balm I began to feel better, and in three days was entirely well. The peculiar soothing qualities which Chamberlain's Pain Balm Possesses I have never noticed in any other liniment. I take pleasure in recommending it." This liniment is also of great value for rheumatism and lame back. For sale by J. W. Samsell, Penns Creek, Pa.



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March 29, '94.

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