CURIOSITIES OF THE POST OFFICE

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When Mr. Rowland Hill’s cheap postage system went into operation, the articles sent were extremely various. One office had, for contents, as officially described, “three dozen bird’s eyes.” A letter from Hull to London contained “one boiled lobster.” From Norwich to Cheltenham, a live blackbird, which was actually transported, kept and fed, and safely delivered to the address. An affectionate mother sent to her son a pottle of strawberries. This was reduced to a jam on the way, and, out of pure sympathy, it jammed its next neighbor, whose original contents consisted of a quantity of valuable lace, and its prospective owner – the person addressed – was the queen dowager. A black bottle, with no wrapper, only a label addressed “Tim M-------------“ ---- “a wee drop o’ the crater” – was mailed at Dublin for Bradford, in Yorkshire. From Perth to Berwick, a salmon. Not unfrequently bank notes are sent in the mail without any envelope or covering, merely by fastening the two ends of the note together with wafers, and then addressing it. Notes as large as £50 have been sent this way. From Aberdeen to Ayr two hares and a grouse; from Wooten Bassett to Sawbridgeworth, six packages of wedding cake and one plum pudding in the same mail. Live leeches have been sent in bladders, and the bladders bursting, the leeches have been found investigating and exploring the interior of her majesty’s mails. A live mouse, a corkscrew, a paper of shoe nails, a roast pheasant to Mrs. ------, Brighton: part of a human limb for dissection (detected by the smell), rolls of cigars, Lucifer matches, detonating powder, prussic acid, a pistol loaded to the muzzle, a poodle dog, a sailor’s jacket, bottles of perfumery, a sheath knife, a full suit for an infant to Lady I----------, “with love:” a jar of pickles, a porcelain tea set, a box full of live spiders, a young alligator or horned lizard, alive, “to Master I-------- H------------, to assist him in his natural history studies;” a case of dentist’s instruments, daguerreotype portraits, and a live frog, are among the multifarious articles that are sometimes sent as letters. There is a regulation that requires all glass, edged tools, pyrotechnics, liquids, and whatever is liable to injure the mail to be stopped, but many of these things travel, unobserved, to their journey’s end.

Sometimes newspapers are made to carry brief messages, the sender supposing there can be no harm in sending “just a word.” Here are samples of writing attempted to be concealed in a newspaper, with the penalty attached, double letter postage – fourpence for every ounce:

“With my love,” - 1s 4d  “Now postman, don’t you steal this paper,” - 1s 4d
“All well,” - 1s 0d
“My dearest,” - 0s 8d  “Send your dangerrotype,” - 1s 4d
“Pray, come soon” - 1s 4d
“Baby well,” - 1s 0d  “I leave tomorrow,” - 1s 4d

Most of these singular packages are prepaid, but if the person to whom they are addressed will not take the letter or package, it may be returned, and the sender compelled, by summary process, to pay the full amount of postage, being double the sum it would have been if paid in advance.

The articles that pass through our own post office are quite as varied as those of our English neighbors. A writer in Hours at Home says:

“I have once more visited the dead letter office – a visit that always give pleasure and gratifies curiosity. Here I saw clerks taking $500 a day out of the letters so profusely scattered over their desks, and among the various articles recently taken out of their envelopes I noticed the following: slippers, valentines, a duck’s head, thermometers, false teeth, pistols, mittens, fern leaves, false hair, laces, paper
collars epaulets, horns, pipes, watch cases, hoops, albums, dolls (one of them two feet high – it must have required a monster envelope), butterflies, mats, medicines, silver goblets of full size, earrings, butter knives, spoons, gold and silver watches (very little gold and silver about them, however), shells, purses, soap, sugar, tea, coffee, bows and arrows, books, pictures, a box of cigars, a bottle of Jamaica ginger, a squirrel’s tail, prisms, combs, boxes, &c.”

It used to be a common source of amusement to the clerks to repeat the old story of rural members of Congress sending home under the official frank their dirty linen for the wash. How true the report is I cannot say.