A POSTAGE STAMP STORY
(Toronto Philatelic Journal, March, 1886)

Primarily I am a postage stamp; just a common, every day, two-cent stamp, possessing only such attributes as are peculiar to my class. Indeed, if I were placed among a thousand of my brethren I doubt if the keenest observer would be able to point me out as being in any way distinguished. A vague gloom enshrouds that portion of my life preceding its development into one of the government agents (if I may so call myself); and I distinctly remember having once been connected in some way with a copy of an English comic paper which drifted as an exchange into an American newspaper office, and thence quickly into a huge waste basket. From that time until arriving at my present state, I passed through the hands of paper-dealers, paper manufacturers, and divers clerks and careless people, my last distinct impression being received from an engraver’s press.

I can scarcely be called a conceited person; still I am led to believe that my mission in the world is an important one. I am kind-hearted, of agreeable disposition and well satisfied with my lot. I frequently congratulate myself upon the good fortune which made me what I am. How much better to be, perchance, the bearer of some kind letter, a perfumed billet-doux, if you please, than a vulgar revenue stamp, fit only to adorn a box of ill smelling cigars or grace a barrel of inferior liquor.

A man hurriedly places a postage stamp upon a letter, which he drops in a convenient letter box, and entirely forgets the circumstance. It humbly serves his purpose; beyond that he does not care. But think for a moment of the travels of that same stamp, of the persons it meets, of the message it bears, and say it is not a sentient being.

After my birth I was carefully accounted for to various commonplace officials, and, after some delay, sent to the post office of a certain eastern city. I was purchased soon afterward by Archibald Warrack, who tore me rudely from my friends, and after carrying me about in his pocket-book for a day or two, cast me into a certain dark drawer of his desk.

This Mr. Warrack was about 25, tall, graceful and altogether a very gentlemanly appearing person. He dressed neatly and tastefully, but with no suggestion of foppishness. To be frank, I admired him from the beginning of our acquaintance. Regarding his social and financial status, he was a gentleman of artistic tastes – one of the grand army of dilletanti – possessing an ample bank account and a pedigree which was never questioned.

The desk, into a drawer of which I was so ignominiously thrust, stood in a sunny alcove separated from Mr. Warrack’s studio by a heavy portiere. This little apartment was a very pleasant place, and Mar. Warrack spent considerable more time in lounging than he did in working in the great, are room adjoining. Art was a hobby of mine, and it was with much satisfaction that I found myself placed in such a congenial atmosphere.

Soon after being transferred to the drawer I have before alluded to, I discovered that my quarters were shared by a number of other persons of my own kind, who were reposing on dainty perfumed envelopes. There were, however, black stains upon their escutcheons which showed them to be forever
ruined. I made bold to introduce myself to one of these scarred veterans, and after a few preliminary remarks concerning the weather, politics and so on, said:

“From your looks (date of cancelling) I infer that you have been dwelling with this Mr. Warrack for some time, and, being a stranger, I shall esteem it a favor if you will tell me such things as you feel at liberty to speak of concerning his private history.”

“It’s a sad case,” said my friend, with a deep sigh. He look haggard and worn, and was apparently in great distress.

“How sad?” I inquired sympathetically.

“A sad case,” he continued, without heeding my interruption. “Less than six months ago I was the carrier of a letter, written by a young lady named Rariden – Miss Helen Rariden – to Mr. Warrack, the gentleman whose acquaintance you have recently made. This letter was written in reply to one from him in which he exhausted all the available adjectives of the English language in the sincerest avowals of love, closing with an offer of his heart and hand.”

And the letter of which you were the bearer contained – “

“Her acceptance,” he said, completing my sentence. “Helen Rariden is a beautiful woman, gifted, wealthy and of excellent family. At the time I parted from her, or rather at the time she parted from me, she loved this – fellow with all her pure soul – loved him as a man was never loved before; and he doubtless cared for her – then.”

The emphasis of this last word was destroyed by a pitiful sob, and for a few moments my friend was so moved that he could not speak. I waited patiently until he again began:

“Shortly after the engagement, which naturally followed, Helen (I take the liberty of so calling her) was compelled to accompany her mother to Europe on a trip undertaken in the hope of benefiting the lady’s health. The parting of this Mr. Warrack with his promised bride was tender and touching; I was present at the time in the gentleman’s left-hand coat pocket, and felt the beating of Helen’s heart with distinctness for a few blissful moments. I admit that it was an embarrassing position for me to occupy, but I could not well withdraw, as I was then very much attached to this letter, as I am now.”

I smiled at this little bit of pleasantry, but my neighbor pressed a convenient pen-wiper to his misty eyes and resumed his narrative.

“After Helen went abroad, Warrack was morose and melancholy for a while; he began several pictures with which to occupy his name – gloomy conceptions to correspond with his state of feeling. He first began what he called ‘Arthur and Guinevere’ – the parting scene, you know. He sketched and daubed at it for a week or so, but kicked it off the easel one day in a fit of impatience. When Helen’s first letter came to him (they are in the next drawer below, embellished with cold, haughty, foreign stamps) he replied promptly and at great length – tender, loving messages. O, how true he was!”
The stamp smiled bitterly.

“But he soon became neglectful and would toss Helen’s notes into a corner of the desk and not even open them. Of course, under these circumstances Helen did not write so often, and I soon began to notice a change in Warrack’s manner. He became cheerful and planned some joyous pictures; one of them, a ‘Spring landscape, is on his easel now, and he has ordered the canvas primed for a contemplated work to be called ‘The Lifting of the Clouds.’”

“And what is the cause of this sudden change?” I asked.

“He is interested in another direction,” was the reply.

“And what of Helen?” I inquired.

“She is still true,” answered my friend in a tone of conviction.

This ended our conversation for the time being. My fellow lodger drew back into a dark corner and remained silent for several days.

In the meantime Mr. Warrack seemed happy; he spent much time in singing and whistling snatches of tunes, chiefly from light operas. He painted when in the right mood and I observed through the keyhole of the drawer that the “Lifting of the Clouds” was progressing finely. It was with pain I thought there might be some connection between the title of the picture and the growing coldness in the manner of the young people towards one another, judging from the dwindling of their correspondence.

A few days after my conversation with the elderly stamp, Mr. Warrack opened our drawer and threw in an unopened letter which he had just received. As soon as he went out my friend snatched it and examined it eagerly. The envelope bore the card of a Venetian hotel and a cancelled postage stamp whose language we did not know.

“From Helen?” I said, interrogatively.

“Yes,” was the mournful reply.

Time wore on. It is a fashion time has, even in the life of lowly postage stamps. Spring came tripping down her bright, flower malled path, and in the darkness of our habitation we felt the stirring of re-awakened life. Mr. Warrack did not enter his studio for days at a time. When I spoke of these long absences to my chum he only answered in the language of Tennyson:

In the spring a livelier iris changes on the burnished dove;
In the spring a young man’s fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love.

“Poor Helen!” he said. “O, woman, you alone are long suffering and true.”
Spring, summer, and fall.

One bright autumn day, as my friend and I were conversing in our quarters, Mr. Warrack, who was sitting in the alcove reading a newspaper, cut from its society columns two items which had, through the instrumentality of Fate and the typographical “make-up,” been printed in this order:

Cards have been issued for the wedding of Mr. Archibald Warrack, the rising young artist, and Miss Florence Springer, daughter of Jay Winter Springer, the poet.

“O, the perfidy of man,” said my poor stamp friend when I had finished reading.

The other item read:

A cablegram from Venice announces the marriage at that place of Miss Helen Rariden, who has been sojourning abroad for some time past, to Sir Arthur Lombard, of London.

“The devil!” gasped my friend, through the dust which covered him.

“Not the devil, but the way of the world,” said I.