

SCENES IN THE LIFE OF A LETTER CARRIER

By Fred Lockley, Jr.

When letters come to us in the post-office we lay them on a little table, and arrange them by streets in the same order as the houses to which they are addressed. A little carelessness in this preliminary sorting will often cause the carrier to walk many extra blocks.

Having "routed" the mail, we load up our sacks and start out. My route begins at the intersection of two of the main business streets.

Taking the letters in the left hand and the papers for the first block over the left forearm, I can look over both letters and papers easily. The papers are held in place by a strap with a spring grip, which, as the papers are delivered, can be readily tightened to keep the remainder in place.

Any one accompanying me might think we were playing a game of "follow my leader" or "hare and hounds." I am the hare and the letters and papers I leave are the "scents." The hounds will have a crooked trail to follow. Now a straightaway stretch, and then I double back on my track. Up stairs the trail leads, through a long hall, while I deliver mail to lawyers and doctors as I go; then down a side stairway, or if I have mail for the store below, down the back stairs and in at the rear door. One soon learns all the short cuts.

My load in the business districts melts away like a Walla Walla snow bank before a chinook wind. Soon I have reached the bottom of the sack and the end of the trip. I must return to the postoffice, load my sack afresh and start for the "residence trip." It is now 9 o'clock, and I must return to the postoffice by half past eleven, so as to deliver the eastern mail, which arrives at that time.

The first letter is for a young lady whose lover is in Manila. Ringing the bell and putting the letter in the box,

I start toward the gate when the girl's mother recalls me. She walks with me to the gate.

"Do you remember the letter post-marked Spokane that you brought for Nellie yesterday?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Well, I want you to watch out for letters to Nellie in that handwriting. Don't bring them. Tear them up."

"But I am not allowed to destroy any mail whatever, so it would be out of the question for me to do it."

"Very well, deliver all the rest of her mail to her and put those letters in your pocket to hand to me when you see me alone. I'll attend to them."

"I am sorry to seem disobliging, but I am not allowed to deal so with letters."

"But she isn't of age."

"Then you have a right to have all her mail delivered to you."

"But that will only make matters worse," says the anxious mother. "I want her to get all her mail but those letters from Spokane, which ought to be destroyed. She will think that man has tired of her and has quit writing. She is engaged already to a man at Manila. Since he sailed she has met this man from Spokane. He is worthless; he does not pay his bills, and I can't understand how Nellie can be so fascinated with him. Won't you help me? I don't want to see Nellie's life wrecked."

I tell her how sorry I am, but that the postoffice cannot help her to deceive the girl, even in so good a cause.

"Well, put all her mail in the general delivery and I will call for it," is the mother's parting injunction as I leave.

We carriers see many signs of hidden tragedies and narrowly averted disasters. Some time ago, when I came to a street letter-box, a man

asked me to return a letter which he had dropped in the box a few hours previously. I told him it was impossible. He said that it was very important, and that he must have it.

I said: "One of the sections of the postal laws and regulations says 'carriers are forbidden, under any circumstances, to return to any person whatever, letters deposited in the street letter-boxes, but must take them to the postoffice.'"

He said that he had written a letter under a misapprehension; that, since mailing it, he had discovered that he was mistaken, and that if it was delivered it might cause an estrangement. I told him if he described the letter to me I would write on it, "Hold for writer," and that by applying to the postmaster and signing a receipt it would be returned to him. It is unnecessary to state that the person addressed never received the letter.

There is some one across the street trying to attract my attention. She may have a letter to mail, and carriers ought to be obliging, so I will go over, even if I do not enjoy wading through the mud to do so.

"Do you want me, Mrs. Smith?"

"Yes," she replies. "I am going to ask a favor of you. I'll do as much for you some day. It won't be much out of your way, and your time is paid for, so I'm going to let you take this note to Mrs. Gray."

"But it has no stamp on it," I object, "and even if it had it must go through the postoffice to be canceled and postmarked."

"Of course it hasn't any stamp on it. It isn't important enough to waste a stamp on. Just tell Mrs. Gray that I am not going to the lodge tonight, and ask her to stop and get the lodge books."

"I wish I could, madam. It's a fact that I am paid for my time, but the government is the paymaster, and it

requires me to refuse to deliver private notes or messages. The local postage is designed to help pay my salary."

"Very well. I can send one of the children over after school," she replies, and I can tell by the way the door slams that she thinks I lack an accommodating spirit.

How thoughtless some people are! One lady on my route whenever she meets me on the street, although she sees that I have a heavy load and am trying to make up lost time, invariably stops me with the request for her mail. I frequently have almost to empty my sack in order to get the package in which her mail is routed. After I have given it to her she will say, "Is that all?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Did the mail all come?" she asks, fretfully. "You don't suppose you could have overlooked a letter of mine or handed it to anybody else by mistake?"

Then she will hand back the paper which I had delivered to her and say: "You might as well take this to the house."

I once ventured to tell her that it would cause me a great deal of trouble to put her mail back in its proper package. She asked me if I supposed she wanted to carry that big roll of paper all round town with her, so I meekly took it back and stuck it in the side of my sack, meaning to remember it when I came to her house. I remembered it only when I got two blocks past the house, and so I had the pleasure of retracing my steps that far.

While there are a few such persons on every route, the great majority are thoughtful and considerate. Frequently on hot days one lady on my route has a glass of lemonade or ice water for me. If I happen to pass her house in a drenching shower without an umbrella she sends her little boy to the gate with an umbrella for me.

Upon one occasion I tapped at her door when my hands were so numb that I could not shuffle my letters. She drew me out of the rain into her kitchen.

"I know it's against the rules, but a cup of hot coffee will do you lots of good and keep you from having pneumonia," she said.

She is the kind of a person whom a carrier never takes the notice, "Call for package; too large for the carrier

to deliver." He delivers the package if he has to make a special trip to do so.

Another woman on my route has a large black dog whose name is Jack. When she sees me coming a block away she sends Jack to get the mail. He rushes up with his mouth wide open, as if he were only going to make one mouthful of me. I put the mail in his mouth and away he goes. He never loses a piece of mail. When he has the mail nothing can distract his attention until he has delivered it safely.

I gave Jack a letter once, and was astonished to see him bound across the street instead of going home. I shouted at him with no effect, and followed him to a strange house, where his mistress was making a friendly call. Jack had been taught to give the mail to no one but her.

Once he came bounding out to meet me, but I had no mail for him. I left some at the next house. He barked and tried to take the letters out of my hand. Realizing the hopelessness of getting any mail from me he started for home very dejectedly. Suddenly up went his head and tail. He had an idea. With an excited bark he rushed back to the house where I had just stopped, put his fore feet against the door, seized with his teeth the paper I had placed above the doorknob, and triumphantly bore it home. I had to recover the stolen property and return it.

With few exceptions the dogs on my route greet me with wagging tails. I am fond of dogs and they know it. On my present route I have been bitten only once or twice.

When the owners of a vicious dog refuse to keep him chained, the carrier is not required to deliver the mail there. Not long ago I had a letter for a family which had just moved into a house on my route. As I walked up to the porch I heard a low growl. Looking over my shoulder I saw a big black dog coming for me. The hair on his back and shoulders was erect, his upper lip was tightly drawn back, exposing his gleaming white teeth. I sprang back just as he jumped at me. With a deep growl he came for me again. I struck him with my toe fairly under the jaw. Taking a heavy roll of papers from my mail and keeping my sack of mail toward him, I struck him over the head with the roll of papers as he jumped next time. Meanwhile I shouted loudly for the man to

come out and call off his dog.

The owner came to the door. "What do you mean by beating my dog over the head like that?" was the remark.

"Call him off! Call him off!" I shouted, "and I'll tell you!"

"You must have begun the fight. He never bites any one but tramps and Chinamen unless he's bothered."

I was backing away from the dog, which was leaping at me furiously in spite of the blows from the heavy roll of papers, and as the owner made no effort to call him off I stopped, picked up a stove-wood length of oak and struck the dog. He dropped in a heap. In an instant he jumped up, staggered a little and ran under the porch.

His owner said he would report me to the postmaster, have me arrested, and do various other desperate things, none of which he did. Instead, he very manfully apologized when he heard from a neighbor who had witnessed the whole affair how the dog had attacked me without the least provocation. Thereafter his dog was kept chained, and has given no further trouble.

There are plenty of amusing incidents to make up for the unpleasant ones. When you walk unsuspectingly up to a door, ring the bell and are greeted with the remark, "Go away, you old nuisance or I'll take the broom to you. You can't fool me! I know who you are!" and when, with your curiosity fully aroused, you ring again and see the door thrown open violently, while a young lady thrusts her head out and shouts "Boo!" at you, it is, to say the least, surprising. You think life is well worth living while you listen to her embarrassed explanation that she thought it was her little brother, who had been ringing the bell and then running away, at intervals through the morning.

Here is a letter and a paper for the faithful sweetheart of a soldier boy at Manila. He has been spending a good part of his pay for postage stamps and express charges.

"Another from Jack!" she says, in triumph. "Have you time to stop just a moment to see what was in that registered package you brought me the other day?"

"I have a minute or two to spare, for I must wait five minutes for opening time on the letter-box on the next corner."

"Here it is," and she hands me a little velvet box. I open it, and there

(Continued on fourth page.)

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