

THE KING OF HOBBIES

ONE MAY morning ninety-nine years ago the couriers in England delivered letters on which a small label had been pasted to show that the postage fee had been paid in advance by the sender. The label was black and bore a likeness of the young Queen Victoria. It was the first postage stamp. Next year, for the hundredth anniversary of the issuance of these little labels, England will hold a huge celebration with a world-wide exhibit at Earl's Court in London.

There have been nearly 100,000 different stamps issued by some 200 countries during these ninety-nine years. Collecting began early. First, small collections of used stamps kept as curiosities; then more important collections of unused examples. Very soon collectors began to specialize—one country or one kind of stamp. Royalty joined in the pastime and someone called it "the hobby of kings and the king of hobbies." The phrase stuck.

Here and there shrewd individuals saw the commercial aspects of stamp collecting. Dealers in "obliterated" (used) stamps were not uncommon in the late 'sixties. During that

decade D. Appleton and Company published an album and J. W. Scott, a stamp fancier, laid the foundation of the great stamp house known today as the Scott Stamp and Coin Company. Stamp collecting had become a business.

Next came counterfeits and then experts to detect them. Societies were formed for the exchange of information. A word was coined: philately. Specialists were called philatelists. On March 1, 1868, the *American Journal of Philately* was issued with Scott as its editor. Stamp collecting had become a science.

Today there are 10,000,000 collectors in the United States—one out of every thirteen persons. The selling of stamps, a vast, internationally related activity, is one of the major businesses of the world. In New York City alone something like 5,000 people are employed in this business and its immediate ramifications. The annual expenditure by collectors must easily be above \$100,000,000.

In the upper brackets fine stamps are rarer than fine jewels; and they cost more. The men who sell them are reliable experts, as expert and honor-

able as the great jewel merchants. The one-cent magenta of British Guiana, for instance, brought \$50,000 when sold at auction in Paris some years ago. It was bought by Mr. Hinds of Utica, New York. The agent of King George V bid on it, but stopped short of the selling figure. No one would venture to say what this stamp will bring when it goes under the hammer again.

However, few collectors aspire to the rarer items; fewer still can afford them. The average collector has quite different interests.

Why do they collect? Each collector will have a different answer to this question. In the main, people collect stamps for the same reasons that other people collect etchings, old furniture, meerschaum pipes, or snuff boxes—for fun. It is the only good reason.

Collecting itself is right-hand, first cousin to the acquisitive instinct. That is why so many small boys—and so few girls—are collectors. Collecting stamps is something more than a hobby. The process enters almost at once into phases of research with precisely the same method involved as in botanical or zoological study—the scrutiny of character and variation, then identification, classification, and so on.

Then there are the historical

and political interests. A series of stamps is a symbol and a record of an entire political evolution. Reconstructing a postal history has something of the same interest that attends on the reconstruction of an extinct animal from a few fragments of bone.

The real philatelist is a pretty good scientist and a first-rate research man. There is the paper in endless varieties; watermarks, often difficult to identify; kinds of printing and engraving (some stamps are engravings, some are lithographs or typographs, some are printed on flat-bed presses, some on rotary presses—which alters the size of the stamp and creates a minor variety); kinds of ink; varieties of perforations with technical names from several languages. Back of the actual definition of the stamp itself lie the political or economic reasons for the issue, the events commemorated, the significance of the national symbols, and much more. All of this is a part of the fascination of the subject.

What do they collect? First of all, no one tries to bring together even an approximation of all the stamps of the world. It would cost millions of dollars and take years. Some items, in royal collections, or in national museums, are unobtainable.

Many collectors choose specialties which cut across geographical lines. Heading the list in popularity is the map stamp. Ship stamps rank next, but a complete collection of these would run into high figures. The many pictures of the ex-Kaiser's yacht, the *Hohenzollern*, on stamps of the former German colonies are among higher priced items. Pictures of authors and composers make attractive groups. Most countries have honored their great men. France has stamps with portraits of Victor Hugo, Anatole France, and others; Portugal celebrates Camoëns; Germany has a short series of musicians and another longer one of writers and musicians; Austria had a musicians' series—one was a portrait of the waltz master, Johann Strauss.

Lily Pons, charming coloratura of the Metropolitan Opera, has a collection of musicians, but the little singing actress, Deanna Durbin, collects air-mails. Adolph Menjou collects American revenues and both Mickey Rooney and Jackie Coogan are collectors.

The story of the 1918 American air-mail stamps with the airplane printed upside down figures in a story known throughout the philatelic world. A clerk buying a stamp at a

stamp window spied the sheets of misprints, went out and drew his savings from a near-by bank, bought the sheets, and sold them for a small fortune. They catalogue today at \$4,500.

The layman would say that a stamp with an inverted center has no more place in a stamp collection than a two-headed calf has in a cattle show. But among millions of perfect stamps, the freak is king.

Precancels (those lower denomination stamps canceled in advance with the name of the place of sale to save him for postal clerks) are a brand new specialty. There are now about 400,000 varieties—too many for any one collector of aspire to—the new ones are added daily. There are special catalogues and dealers who handle precancels exclusively.

Covers (envelopes) used on special air trips, first-day covers (post-marked at certain offices on the first day a new stamp is placed on sale)—these are fast growing interests.

If you love stamps and are really attracted to the notion of collecting, don't let anyone discourage you. They are a comfort and a refuge. The field and its fascinations are inexhaustible.—*Henry Bellamann, condensed from The Commentator.*

