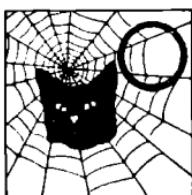


The Copeland Collection.

BY MARGARET DODGE.



If the personality of things deemed inanimate there is no evidence more convincing than the case of the man possessed by his possessions. Sometimes it is a hundred-year-old clock, sometimes a china teapot, sometimes a "body Brussels" carpet, for whose safety and specklessness a whole household must regulate their habits and sacrifice their comfort, making of their one-time servant a veritable household god.

But to inspire absolute fetish worship nothing compares with a great family library, — not one of the decorative variety, but a collection into which have passed the wit and work, the hours and desires of a devotee of single mind and purpose.

Such a library, with its domination intensified by the loving service of three generations of owners, so called, was the Copeland Shakespeare Collection. A library of such glorious proportions as to fill the four sides of the green-rep-hung book room of the square, white house whose Greek portico opened on the chief street of Newtown. A library of such completeness, such rare variorums and folios, such priceless commentaries, such curiosities of French and German, and even Finnish and Slavonic translations of the immortal dramatist, as to draw Shakespeare lovers and rare volume fanciers not only from Boston, thirty miles away, but from Cambridge, and New Haven, and Philadelphia, and New York. Even potent Oxford dons and Schlegel-steeped German critics from Berlin and Heidelberg had been moved by the mere report of it to cherish desires in direct opposition to the Eighth Commandment. For the mint did not exist that could coin the money to buy a single volume of these thousands, said Horatio Copeland, when approached with offers whose fabulous size were for years Newtown's measure of opulence.

Withal, this was no cold and formal collection, but one that invited intimacy and responded to the touch of tender adoration. In short, it was a library to idolize, and Copeland idolized it with the inbred devotion of a priest the third in line, sacrificing to it, as had his father and grandfather, with their self-effacing wives as altar servers, all the resources of his dwindling income, save enough to maintain the family decorums, fingering as a breviary the red-bound manuscript catalogue in which he and his father and his grandfather had recorded each new accession. And like most priests, he held those not worshipers at his shrine as belonging in outer darkness.

For such idolatry the Nemesis that follows upon all extremes is sure but usually slow, except when some other idol reveals itself to contest the shrine.

In Copeland's case the idol did reveal itself when he was thirty-three, and according to Newtown's usages settled into celibacy; and because his excess had been of the finer sort, the new idol was no other than Elizabeth Lloyd, the most spirited, the most seductive, the most sought after and bowed down to of all the girls in the township,— and the least bookish. That she was herself the stuff that books are made of was argued by members of the Elizabeth Lloyd cult when confronted with legends of her early revolt against not only the speller, and geography, and reader, but even the potential books existing in ink and paper.

And indeed, aside from the obvious contradictory charm of sea-blue eyes, an olive skin, and a figure youthful but marked by the carriage of queenhood, there was in the droop of her full, dark eyelids, in the enigmatic curve of her lips in repose, a suggestion of being more than she seemed, that even unimaginative men would interpret to fit their ideals.

Perhaps it was because of this unknown quality in the girl's make-up that Copeland persuaded himself in the face of all forewarnings — and simply her unsympathetic manner of holding a volume should have been sufficient — that, having all other things, this love of books would be added unto her. Perhaps Elizabeth did not discourage the belief. Perhaps even, accustomed to an undivided kingdom, she dreamed of winning him from the worship of his ancestors. Or possibly she thought nothing at all except

of her love for him, for that she loved Horatio Copeland with that love which men of single mind and unworldly habit sometimes win from worldly women is beyond dispute. At any rate, at nineteen she settled down in the white house with the Greek portico. And for awhile all was happiness and content, and Elizabeth Copeland made believe that she preferred moth-eaten upholstery to mahogany and velvet, herbs to stalled ox, and — but here the connection does not hold — the devotion of the recluse to that of those driving, dancing, one-time would-be lovers of hers. That they had none of them passed the probationary stage indicates that she had balance as well as charm. But their admiration, backed by substantial offers of houses and horses, and the appropriate setting for her fascinations, had been a constant factor in her life since the day when she took her first waltz steps at the Newtown dancing school. And the need and habit of queenhood were in her blood, just as the need and worship of his books were in the blood of him who had promised to love and cherish her until death did them part. With such an inheritance it needed only the clarifying circumstances of every-day companionship to reveal to these people that they were not one, but two and two.

At this date — I write of sixty years ago — it is impossible to decide whether it was Mr. Copeland's refusal to accompany his wife to a dinner party in the next town, or her indifference to a rare quarto Shakespeare, bought at the price of a set of furniture, that was at the beginning of this revelation. Tradition also only hints at the fine details of its growth, — the gradual encroachment of Copeland's hours in the library upon those once given to his wife, the listlessness with which she listened to his unintelligible raptures over grubby commentaries, his blindness over the growing shabbiness of her trousseau, his maddening caresses, in her very presence, of the so-called insensate volumes that arrived weekly by post and express. Nor does it tell of that hour — which any one past twenty can imagine — when Mrs. Copeland, looking into her husband's eyes, saw there another image than her own.

For that reason it is hard to judge fairly of the conduct of these two people during the one episode of their married life that not merely tradition but contemporary records present in bold outline.

Stripping it of all superfluities of gossip and conjecture, the circumstance stands naked as follows: —

On the first anniversary of their marriage, it had been arranged, the Copelands were to open their house to all the young people of the township, and indeed of half the county, — an event for which went forward preparations unheard of in the history of the Copeland house, at least since it had enshrined the Copeland Collection. To tell, however, in detail of the gleam of silver candelabra, the sparkle of glass, the odors of pound cake and spiced meats, the fragrance of lavender-scented linen, would be to convey no impression of the elaborateness of the affair for sixty years ago.

It is enough to say that the occasion was to be one that should restore to Elizabeth Copeland the crown and scepter of her queenship, and in token thereof she was to assume the one gown in her trousseau that had not become shabby, — her wedding gown of watered white silk. And here again mere description would by no means convey the effect upon those simple people of that gracious figure in its shining raiment, or of the spirited pose of the head above the frosty white bodice, or of the “liquid shining of the eyes that answered the chastened luster of the string of pearls encircling the round throat.”

But here I quote a private letter descriptive of the wedding. When Mrs. Copeland unpacked her gown on the morning of her anniversary, she found that the string of pearls, merely a clever imitation, was crushed and spoiled.

Whereupon, Horatio Copeland, with that instant alertness that occasion sometimes awakes in men not commonly accounted “of action,” was out of the house posting away to Boston after a new string of pearls — real ones they were to be this time — before his wife had swept up the fragments.

It is safe to say that it was not merely the thought of a new ornament that parted Mrs. Copeland’s lips in the smile noted by all who saw her during that day.

But there was no such smile on the lips that at seven that night welcomed the guests who streamed through the Greek portico into the drawing room opposite the library, — only the semblance of pleasure; while the head above the frosty white bodice assumed with each moment the more spirited pose of a wife who received

for herself and her absent husband. For Mr. Copeland still delayed.

"Detained to gratify a whim of hers," she explained to an old admirer, who straightway passed the word around. "Doubtless," she continued, "he would return by eight at the latest."

But at eight the lord of the manor was still absent, and at nine, and at ten, and still the glittering smile and the spirited head marked queenhood.

It was nearing eleven, and whispers were going about of an accident and a searching party, when there was a hum of wheels outside and a step on the porch. Then the door opened admitting the mud-splashed figure of the master of the house, who hesitated on the threshold, staring around for a second like one just awakened from a dream. In his hand he clutched a small oblong parcel.

For that instant the semblance of a smile melted, and the eyes under the full dark lids looked with no enigmatic expression into the eyes of her lord.

"You have taken all that trouble — gone sixty miles — to get my necklace," was all that she said. But there was that in her voice that more than one man present that night would have crossed the world to hear.

As she spoke, she had taken the parcel, and turning so that she faced the room, began to undo it.

And suddenly the man's face went gray.

"Don't, Elizabeth, I conjure you, do not open it — now," he said hoarsely. "I was beside myself — it was so rare an example — I followed one man all over the city before I found it — "

His voice died away in a husky laugh as she shook aside the paper and held out almost at arm's length a small, shabby calf-bound volume of Shakespeare.

For at least five moments she stood there silent, the frosty white folds of her wedding gown gleaming in the candle-light, her smile glittering, her eyes shining like a pool on which had formed a sudden glaze of ice.

Then — but concerning what followed opinion seems to be divided. Some say that she deliberately threw the book into the fireplace, others that she simply let it fall, and that it was by ac-

cident it reached the flames. At any rate, before the calf-bound volume was consumed — with the sickening odor of a burnt offering of flesh — the rooms were emptied, save of Mrs. Copeland and her husband.

But the words that reached the ears of those still within hearing were not to be mistaken. In plain terms the woman declared that for the Copeland Collection she had gone shabby, fared poorly, lived lonely — without a murmur — until this. Now the time had come when her husband could make his choice ; it was a divorce either from his library or from his wife.

As for her, she said, she wished that she might never see a book again.

Oh, it was all very melodramatic, no doubt (as life will be at times in spite of the realist), and hardly less so that hour on the day following when great wagons drove up to the Greek portico, and the books of the Copeland Collection, gathered up in armfuls like so many cords of wood, were dumped into the wagons and jolted away.

As for the scene at the Boston salesroom when the Collection was auctioned off at half its value, with Horatio Copeland standing by, a spectator said that it reminded him of the sale at the block of a bankrupt planter's slave children.

But the really subtle working out of the Nemesis was not a matter of scenes or episodes.

Indeed, at first it seemed — to lookers-on — that the affair at the anniversary party had cleared the air, and was in the way of bringing the couple into closer accord than ever before. For all at once the one-time scholar and recluse bloomed into a veritable gallant, squiring his wife everywhere, going out of the township, even the county, to escort her to card parties, and assemblies, and suppers, at which Elizabeth Copeland was always easily dominant, in gowns of such fantastic foreign make as emphasized that already noted enigmatic quality of her beauty. He also insisted upon opening his house — newly done over with much gilding, and rose satin, and dangling crystal, as was the fashion of great houses in those days — to half the county, entertaining at dinners and dances whose viands, and wine, and music were to Newtown what Lucullus's feasts were to ancient Rome.

And even in the privacy of his home, on the rare occasions when husband and wife were alone, it was reported that Elizabeth Copeland never appeared save in a new gown of silk, or lace, or flowered Indian muslin, that she never sat at a table not laid and served as for a banquet, that she never saw the day that did not bring her some present in the way of finery or furnishing.

It was as though the Copeland Collection had been converted into a horn of plenty, from which fell into her hands every material gift save one.

Into that house there came no more a book, or a magazine, or so much as a scrap of printed paper. Even the letters with the foreign postmarks accumulated unopened in great heaps on desks, and table, and floors. And if, night after night, the husband stole down into the dismantled library and sat gazing for hours by the light of the candle at the blank shelves that stared at him like empty eyesockets, or fingering the manuscript catalogue that had been as a breviary to three generations of Copelands, — thinking, thinking till dawn crept over the New England hills, the fact was guessed only by one other, and spoken of never by her.

What Elizabeth Copeland had asked with her lips she had received in measure heaped and running over.

But by the observant it was noted that the glaze as of ice on her eyes never melted.

And by and by the Newtownians began to wonder whether this topsy-turvy state of things could last. Indeed, to no man is it permitted to run counter to nature for long. One day in the sixth month of his dancing, riding, dinner-giving metamorphosis Horatio Copeland contracted a heavy chill, — on a twenty-mile sleigh ride and supper party, — and after lying two days in a fever, died without regaining consciousness.

One year and six months from her wedding day Mrs. Copeland was a widow, and, for those times, an heiress, inheriting all her husband's estate in a will that by an irony of early date made a special bequest of the Copeland Collection to his "beloved wife Elizabeth." At the time the circumstance called forth no comment from Newtownians, save on the opportuneness of the sale that left her in possession of a comfortable sum of ready money. And then Newtown turned its attention to other things,—the anti-slavery

“fanatics,” for instance, and the clever sketches just appearing by a promising young humorous writer named Dickens,—and waited for the year of mourning that must elapse before the rose and gilt drawing room, the prism-hung chandeliers, the fantastically appropriate foreign gowns, should be in evidence again.

But to the township of Newtown the sight not only of these wonders, but of the spirited head and the gracious figure that they had so “set off,” was never again vouchsafed.

For instead of the Elizabeth Copeland they had known there stole out into the dusk of the evening, or in the pallor of early morning, a mere gray shadow of a woman, absent, aged, preoccupied, her eyes ever cast down in the unseeing look of the recluse. In place of the rustling silks and flowered muslins, they saw her figure swathed in shapeless folds of limp black cashmere; in place of buckled shoes, they saw her slender foot disguised in rude heavy shoes; instead of mantillas of lace, heavy worsted shawls; instead of flower-trimmed hats, the coarse straw bonnet of middle age. And through the single servant — for never again did visitor penetrate to that house — there trickled out tales of lace-trimmed lingerie replaced by the coarsest unbleached cotton, of famine fare eaten from dishes of earthenware, of evenings spent in the dark to save candles, of hours passed locked in the empty library.

Greatest marvel of all, it was told — to incredulous ears — that she who had always preferred an oar or a needle to pen or book had been metamorphosed into a veritable student, always reading, reading, reading, evening and morning, letters, and magazines, and books that came weekly by post and express.

Finally even that servant was dismissed, and only the grocer who brought her meager little provisions could tell of the rough red hands, once so soft and white, of the one-time lithe figure bent as from stooping over rude work and long tasks.

And gradually Newtown came to regard the comings and goings of the detached figure as one of the unalterable facts of life, no more to be questioned than the orbit of the planets, and to attribute to some unexplained law of nature her occasional departures to places they knew not of, on errands of which they could form no conjecture.

Twice in the passing of years, when the house was shuttered and the door barred, and the grocer dismissed for nearly a twelve-month, it was rumored that she had gone to strange countries across the sea. But as the years of her widowhood grew to forty, and factories and workingmen's cottages sprang up in one-time gardens and meadows, and the soot from tall chimneys blackened the white pillars of the Greek portico, a generation arose that knew nothing of Elizabeth Copeland.

That was why, when the mortgagee drove up to the door one raw March day, and pulled the bell, and pounded on the windows, and scraped the paint in flakes from the back door with his patent leather shoes, there was no one to tell him of the big vans that three times within the half year had driven empty up the elm-hung driveway and gone out loaded; of the shadowy figure that at dusk stole out of the side door and down to the squalid business street, concealing under her shawl curious, many-cornered, bulging bundles that she never brought back again. Nor was there any one to tell him that for three days now no one had come from the house or gone to it, and that not the thinnest film of smoke had issued from the chimney.

“Gone abroad for good, I suppose,” said the mortgagee, with a slight accent of mockery, when he had finally summoned the old locksmith who knew the house, and by his aid forced an entrance.

And, indeed, the absolute bareness of the house bore him out. For in all the place there was not so much as a stick of furniture, nor a dish, nor a gown, nor anything save a few worthless ornaments and some heaps of empty envelopes.

Upstairs and downstairs and through all the musty, echoing chambers the mortgagee paraded, followed by the locksmith, until they paused for the second time before the locked door of the library.

“Queer,” murmured the man who knew the house, as he worked on the lock; “queer that she should have kept the key to this. Why, you know—”

And then, as with a groan of complaint the door suddenly swung back, he stepped aside to give passage to his companion. But with his first step across the threshold the mortgagee came to a stammering halt, looking somehow shrunken and abashed. Then with a movement of reverence both men bared their heads.

For on the uncarpeted floor, the limp folds of her black cashmere dress arrayed in decorous lines, her rough, misshapen hands clasped upon a certain much-worn manuscript catalogue, like a priest's upon a breviary, her face, yellow and creased as a sheet of crumpled parchment, fixed in a smile,—as though at the last sight of things unspeakably dear,—lay Elizabeth Copeland. And all about her and around her, filling the shelves that lined the four walls, piled on the window sills, overflowing even to the floor, were books of every size, shape, and age, but all bearing the name of Shakespeare.

“It’s the Copeland Collection!” whispered the locksmith when his tongue was finally unloosed.

And such indeed it was, so far as one woman, unlettered, unfriended, never wealthy, finally impoverished, could summon it back from the bourne of missing volumes. What was the compelling motive, whether remorse or mania, or the ironic bequest of her husband’s will, or some subtle inheritance by which, say married folk, not merely material possessions but even tastes and habits of the dead are sometimes transmitted to the surviving wife or husband,—or whether some unguessed force differing from all of these, must always remain a subject for speculation.

But this much is a matter of history—that from Boston second-hand shops, and bookstalls on the quays of Paris, from country parsonages, and over sea “great house” libraries, from England and from India, and mystic Japan even, from all the marts where libraries are made and unmade by laws immutable as those governing atomic combination, she had summoned back the far-wandering volumes. And to-day, though broken and incomplete, like some family reunited after years of separation, the Copeland Collection lived again.

In an alcove of the library at Newtown—an alcove bearing Horatio Copeland’s name—it lives still, the sole bequest of a woman who left beside only the money for the humblest burial in the grave with her husband.

And there are those who, knowing the Collection intimately, and visiting it day after day, say that it speaks to them not only of the past, but of the future,—of that other side of Nemesis by which any extreme of sorrow finds extreme compensation.

But this narrative deals with facts, not speculation.