



LIVING WITH A BIBLIOPHILE

Gertrude M. White

He was already a scholar when we met at Wayne State University in the fall of 1947. His first published work had been a bibliography of John Donne, the great 17th century metaphysical poet, and this in its making had got him into deep trouble.

He had enlisted in the Army after Pearl Harbor and was serving in the Signal Corps in Alaska where the publishers sent him the galley proofs. He corrected them with the customary proofreader marks and presently found himself up before his commanding officer on suspicion of espionage. It did not help that his father had been born in Como, Italy, his mother in Riga, formerly Latvia but now under Russian rule. Two of his cousins were in the Nazi army.

“How did you get out of that one?” I asked.

He smiled. “I just explained proof-reading to them.” No one could have looked more guileless and fortunately his colonel was a reasonable man. W. spent the rest of the war decoding radio messages, reading the books the Red Cross flew in, and playing poker. At the war’s end he was in Officer Candidate School, declined his commission, and made tracks as rapidly as possible to a Baptist girls’ college in Texas which had offered him a job.

“Why Texas? Why the Baptists?” I inquired.

“Women,” he said succinctly. “I hadn’t seen a woman for nearly two years.

He enjoyed the girls at Baylor until Wayne State offered him a better job. Detroit meant Charles Feinberg and his Walt Whitman collection, the best in the country. It was an irresistible attraction. He said goodbye to the Baylor girls to pursue his researches in Charlie's library and to enter with him into a long and fruitful collaboration. Together they founded the Walt Whitman Review, which Charlie managed and W. edited for twenty-five years.

Meanwhile, I had got my doctorate in English literature at the University of Chicago. I had—I thought—finished my thesis on Gilbert Keith Chesterton until my committee took it into their heads to demand a final chapter on Chesterton's reputation since his somewhat premature death in 1936. This stymied me. It did not occur to me to remember my stringent bibliography course and realize that this was the point of it.

"What shall I do?" I asked W. in panic.

"Good heavens," he said. "It's easy. I could do it in two or three days. Go to the anthologies. What poems of Chesterton's have been reprinted, when and where? What is said about them? Go to the literary criticism. What has been said recently about his work, which books, and how does it compare with what was being said about him in, say, 1910 when he was one of the most prominent writers in England. Go to the obits, see what they say, find any biographies, rummage in the TLS, look up Belloc—they were buddies . . ."

I had come to my senses. "O.K, O. K. I get the idea." And shortly with W's help I had produced a respectable chapter. He checked the references with an eagle eye. "Send it off," he said. In a few weeks I had my degree.

Meanwhile, Senator Fulbright had made it possible for former G.I.s to go back to school. Up to now, W. had made do with an M.A. from the University of Southern California, where he studied under the late Frank Baxter. But a scholar needs a doctorate and the Fulbright Act was an opportunity not to be missed. Would I marry him and go overseas to live on the G.I.Bill? We would be poor, but it might be fun.

I gave my patient mother three weeks notice and we were

married at my summer home in Point Judith, Rhode Island. We had two days in the fleshpots of the Waldorf Astoria and then consigned ourselves to E deck on the Queen Elizabeth II. And presently we were in a one room walkup apartment on the edge of Soho, within walking distance of the British Library. W. was settling to work at Queen Mary College of the University of London. He had brought with him xeroxes of textual changes in the manuscripts of A. E. Housman, author of "A Shropshire Lad," and he was happy. This was meat and drink to him. A good thing, too. Those years England was sunk in the depths of food rationing and precious little did we have to eat but cabbage and cod.

After a few months, however, he struck a snag. He came home from a conference with Dr. Sutherland, his advisor, looking stricken. "They want me to write a chapter on the poetry," he said, glumly.

"That seems reasonable. After all, the poetry is what matters."

"Of course it is. But I haven't had the kind of critical training you got at Chicago with Crane. I know the poetry but I don't know how to write about it."

I looked at him in pity. "Good heavens. It's easy. Talk about themes. There are two or three recurrent themes in Housman. Talk about verse form, cadence, and especially metaphor. Compare "A Shropshire Lad" with other lyric poetry, especially, I would say, Elizabethan. Discuss the relationship of the verse to what you already know about his life."

He groaned. "You make it sound easy. But I don't know how to get at it."

"Well, look. I'll tell you some things to say and you put them in your own words."

We tried but it didn't work. He grew increasingly desperate. "I'm no good at this."

I crossed my fingers and made a pact with the devil. "I'll write it. I only hope Dr. Sutherland doesn't detect another hand."

"Would you?" He was pathetically grateful. "Sutherland's

never seen any of my writing except a bunch of footnotes. He'll never know the difference."

So I wrote it. A few weeks later W. returned from his doctor's oral half laughing and half chagrined. "He knows!"

"Who knows what? Did you pass?"

"Of course. They complimented me on my scholarship. But Sutherland knows you wrote that chapter."

"What did he say?"

He said, "Mr. White, didn't you mention that your wife has a doctorate from the University of Chicago? She studied with Ronald Crane? Give her my compliments and say that I'd like to meet her sometime."

"God forbid. Well, now that we have our degrees, by hook or by crook, we can go home and study to be honest."

We flew home on the El Al airline, a perilous journey to Shannon, to Keflavik, to Gander and on to New York and spent the summer at Point Judith. Professionally, we were flourishing. W. had his degree and a number of articles. I had published a Red Badge murder mystery and my first academic piece, the lead article in PMLA. But we had no house, no furniture, no car, no medical insurance, we were \$3000 in debt and I was pregnant. We sublet an apartment in Detroit, W. started earning a salary again and moonlighted at the Four Corners Press in Franklin, and one chilly March morning our first son was born.

W. had declined to stay and hold my hand. Nor would he sit sweating in the waiting room with the other expectant fathers. He told the doctor to call him in good time and departed. I was glad he went. I had seen him turn white at the sights and sounds of the maternity ward, almost as white as he had been at our wedding. After a long interval I was lying on a meat wagon in the hospital corridor, Geoffrey beside me in his basket, and my husband was walking toward us with the strangest look I had ever seen on his face.

"What were you thinking?" I asked, later.

He looked away, embarrassed. "I was thinking you could die doing this."

We found a small house on a green slope outside Franklin Village and managed to scare up the down payment. And there we lived happily for thirty-one years. Our first move was to enclose the breezeway that ran between kitchen and garage and make it W.'s study.

"How will you manage the books"? I asked, for our library grew steadily larger. "Easy. Bricks and boards. They'll do fine. You don't need bookcases." And presently the brick walls of the breezeway were covered with books and Geoffrey was sternly forbidden to touch them. I wouldn't have dared myself. W. knew where every item was, from volumes to the skinniest pamphlet. The books were threatening to take over. W. made additional brick and board shelves in the bedrooms. We converted the garage into our bedroom and he put up shelves in there. But when we made a study for me out of the toolshed, I struck.

"This is my space. You've got the whole rest of the house." There were books everywhere but in the bathrooms. I collected cookbooks, and they were in the kitchen. Usually the first question anyone stepping across our threshold asked was "Have you read all these books?" W. looked at them in mild disdain. "You can't live without books," he would say.

He was a patient man. He endured the spider plants which Roger, our second son, insisted on hanging over his head, protesting only when they dripped on the galleys. He let the cats wander about his desk and sleep on the page proofs. But he would not tolerate anyone messing about with the collection. That was his department.

Our favorite form of entertainment was a small dinner party, ten people crammed around the antique cherry dining table that had cost us \$20 at an auction. Conversation flowed around that table. But, dinner over, W. would have an inspiration.

"Say, I found a rare Hemingway item the other day. Come and see it."

Promptly the men would accompany him into the breezeway. But chances were that the women were not biblio-

philes. They would sit, ostentatiously patient, now and then stifling a yawn and glancing at the doorway. Socially, it was an impossible situation. When the same thing had happened several times in a row, I sat W. down and read the riot act to him.

“You’ve got to stop doing that. It breaks up the party. You may be enjoying yourself but half the guests aren’t happy.”

“I only wanted to show them what I was working on,” he protested.

“Show me. Ask your friends over in the afternoon and show them then. Don’t break up the dinner parties.”

He understood where, as they say, I was coming from, but it was hard. How could anyone not want to see a rare Hemingway, a new edition, or a Walt Whitman piece?

As for Housman’s “A Shropshire Lad” on which he had written his dissertation, there were 121 copies of that, each differing from the others in some small particular. Unless they were book people, our visitors found this bizarre.

“What do you want all those for?” they would ask. “Aren’t they all the same?”

“No, They’re all different. That’s what collecting is about.”

How, indeed, does anyone, collector or not, explain a passion? W. had a passion for books and, a close second, for travel. Travel for its own sake: “For to admire and for to see/For to behold this world so wide/It never done no good to me/But I can’t drop it if I tried.” And travel for the sake of finding books. And so, in 1963 the four of us were bound for Korea where W. had a Fulbright fellowship.

Without a word of Korean, W. plunged into the grimy metropolis of Seoul like a rabbit popping down a hole. He came back week after week with some new treasure. He would exhibit it to me, then wrap it up and mail it home, to join the collection. Once or twice books disappeared and he came to me in baffled annoyance.

“Say, do you know what happened to *The Old Man and the Sea*? I can’t find it anywhere.”

I knew where it was, for I had seen it in Adjumoni’s bed-

room. She was our housekeeper, a farm girl who had taught herself to read and write by looking over her brother's shoulder while he did his lessons. Education was not lavished on girls in Korea at that time. She had lost her husband in the late war and had two children to support. Now she was reading Hemingway in the intervals of looking after us.

"Adjumoni's got it. She likes Hemingway."

"Well, tell her to take care of it. That's a first edition."

At Christmas we all flew to Japan for a holiday. And W. came down with the Guillane-Barré syndrome and very nearly died. I got him out of the hospital three months later at the end of March, so weak he could hardly walk, and at his behest the four of us set off around the world. Nothing was going to do him out of that trip or stop him from making the calls he had planned on foreign book dealers. And make them he did, from Hong Kong to Egypt, to Jordan, to Israel, to Greece, to Vienna, to Munich, and Paris, leaning on my arm at first but rapidly gathering strength. In Paris my brother cabled me that our father had died and we cancelled England and flew home in time for the funeral. And in August, one year to the day from the time we had left, we drove up our driveway to the house we loved. Our tenants had been good caretakers and our animals were glad to see us. And in the breezeway were mounds of packages W. had mailed from around the world. He spent the next few weeks rearranging the whole collection.

As Chaucer would say, *What nedeth wordes mo?* We lived, watched our boys grow, taught, wrote, traveled, entertained our friends, and all of a sudden it was 1981, Geoff was about to be married, and it was time for W. to retire. He had reached the statutory age of seventy, still vigorous, and at once proceeded with Charlie's help to get an appointment as visiting professor at the University of Haifa. He was to give a seminar on Walt Whitman. He asked them to give me a course on Chaucer. We both had a wonderful time in Haifa. The following year he had a visiting professorship at his alma mater, U.S.C, the year after that we were both teaching at Rollins College in Florida. Roger was taking care of the house and the cats.

But all things must end. W. suffered—as we learned later—a stroke in the cerebellum and our active lives were over. He gave his collection to the Alderman Library at the University of Virginia. They had the best collection of Faulkner in the country. Now they would have the best Hemingway collection, with quantities of Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, A. E. Housman, and John P. Marquand thrown in. The collection was cataloged as the William and Gertrude M. White Memorial Collection. But it's not mine. It's his. And scholars are working on it. That's what matters.

Shortly before he died, I took him my latest article. He had been in a nursing home for many months. I hoped he might still be able to read it. For forty-five years each of us had read what the other had written. W. had long since taken to signing his personal letters, "W and G, the old firm." But the old firm was out of business. He looked at the manuscript wistfully.

"What's it on? Chesterton? Send it out." He paused and then paid me the greatest compliment in his power. "Everything you write is good."

If he were to walk into my apartment today he would view the jumbled coffee table and the disorderly bookcases with dismay.

"What a mess. How can you find anything you want? I could put my hand on anything in the collection."

My dear husband, I wish you were here to straighten out my books and read what I have written. But I know what he would say.

"That's nice. But tell me, what are you working on now?"