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THE VALUE OF RARE BOOKS

BY FREDERIC E. CAMP

Dean of Stevens Institute of Technology

Very few people, outside of those accustomed to use a library as a workshop, really understand the worth of a so-called "rare" book. "Museum-piece—very interesting," they may say, and promptly forget the item itself, except perhaps remembering it enough to tell their friends that they had in their hands a book worth fifteen hundred dollars.

There are many reasons why a particular book or edition may become valuable. In the first place, it may happen that the first edition is the only one. It may have sold slowly and the true worth of the book may not become apparent until long after the author's demise. Then the edition is scattered to the four corners of the earth and many copies may have found their way into the dump heap.

The books an author publishes in his lifetime constitute the record of his thought and art. No later editions of these books serve so well to set forth that record. He may have made changes and revisions of his early work, so we cannot tell from a late version what the first form was. In a collected edition, he may have omitted some of his early work, so that in using such a late edition we could never know what these early writings were. One can never know the whole story about the art and thought of the poet, novelist, historian, or philosopher, unless one has all his work at hand.

Rare books tell much more than merely what their words convey. The printing, binding, and illustrations all
tell a story in themselves. For books are the apparatus of the historian and literary scholar just as machines and laboratory equipment are for the scientist.

Every college library has an obligation to possess full and complete collections as far as it can—particularly if those collections relate to the past history of the college, to its traditions in some specific subject, or to its region. More and more it has become evident that college libraries must specialize this way and not try to compete. Many small colleges are known for this sort of thing. One today goes to Oberlin to look at the Hamlin Garland collection; to Hamilton for its collection on the history and topography of Palestine; to Emory for its *Uncle Remus* collection. One goes to Colby to find its Hardy and its Edwin Arlington Robinson collections.

Like attracts like. When a collector knows that a college takes care of its rare books, is proud of them, displays them, uses them, lets other qualified people use them freely, he is very apt to give his treasures to such a place. He knows that there they will be cherished.

Archibald MacLeish in a recent magazine article pointed out that "a university may lose its faculty and its students and begin again as a great university if its library remained great. But if it lost its library no conceivable faculty and no conceivable student body would hold it to its rank." He went on to point out that civilizations follow the libraries. If in this war the same thing should happen to the libraries of Europe that happened after the Moors destroyed the library of Alexandria, then the only records of our modern civilization would be found in the libraries of America.

Colby can become the great college we are all anticipating with such eagerness, only if her library is encouraged to grow as the New Campus on Mayflower Hill is growing. Every member of the Library Associates aids directly in this great undertaking.