Circular Letter.

From Mrs. Henry Pott
81. Cornwall Gardens
Queen’s Gate
SW.

Sir,

Permit me to draw your attention to the facts which have recently come [into?] my notice with regard to the original edition of the collected "Shakespeare" Plays, known as the First Folio of 1623. In the spring of 1888, when Mr. Donnelly was in this country, he received from M’s James Cary of New York, some papers explanatory of a discovery claimed to have been made by that gentleman of certain wheel-ciphers in the original folio of "Shakespeare." These ciphers are various, but one chief system depends upon certain marks + dots which M’s Cary indicated as being placed over, or under, or between certain letters + figures; or before the names of the characters - These peculiar + suspicious markings the cryptographer had been led to observe whilst endeavoring to find the desired clue to the arrangement of words in the Great Crypto-gram- M’s. Donnelly compared M’s Cary’s descriptions with his own "Staunton" facsimile (pub Day + Son), but he could not find such marks as M’s. Cary printed out, consequently he could make nothing of the wheel-ciphers submitted to him; + this he reported to M’s. Cary - It so happened that I had to a great extent tabulated the so-called "printer’s errors" + "accidents" + "mis-prints" of the First folio, as shown in the reduced fac-simile pub: Chatto + Windus, + for which the late M’s. Halliwell Phillips wrote a Preface- When therefore M’s. Donnelly showed me M’s. Cary’s work, I recognised many of the indications given, + we saw at once that with regard to certain particulars, there were undoubted discrepancies between this Halliwell-Phillipps facsimile + many of the original copies of the 1623 folio, to be found in the great libraries of England and America- At that time M’s. Donnelly was much harrassed with business of various kinds, + as he was on the eve of starting for America, in order to plunge into the seething political struggles of this country, he was disinclined to enter into a totally new line of research, + one which required almost microscopic minuteness of investigation- Thus the correspondence with M’s. Cary passed into my hands. I soon found that the Halliwell Phillips fac-similes from which M’s. Cary + I were working, differed in a vast number of particulars from other "fine" original folios which I have examined. The differences were in all cases additions. In other words, there were in the original folio from which our fac-similes were taken, a quantity of marks, neatly + distinctly made, + some figures turned hind-side before, which do not exist in ordinary Folio copies. Since it is manifestly impossible that the photograph could represent more particulars than were contained in the thing photographed, two alternatives only suggested themselves. Either, these extra marks were printed after the rest of the work (in which case there would have been two editions of 1623), or, more probably, these significant markings must have been put in with a pen, by some member of the Secret Society for whose information the cipher narrative was contrived.

It became necessary then, to ascertain if these peculiarities had been noted by book-worms, + close students of "Shakespeare" texts, + also, from what copy the "reduced fac-simile" was photographed. I wrote to the late M’s. Halliwell Phillips describing some of the marks in question, + asking- 1, Had he any reason to doubt that all the copies of the First Folio which had passed through his hands, were absolutely + invariably identical. & 2. From which copy in what library, was his reduced fac-simile taken? In a long + courteous letter written shortly before his death, M’s Halliwell-Phillipps replied to the first of these questions, that he had never observed any differences; to the second, that he did not know; he had never seen the copy from which the "reduced fac-
I then wrote to the Publishers, Messrs. Chatto + Windus, from whom I learnt that the facsimile in question was copied by a photographic process from an original folio bought by them of Mr. Hayes, Bookseller of Manchester, + that they believed the original to be now in the private library of Mr. Robert Roberts, of Boston Lincolnshire. Correspondence with this gentleman has served to establish the singular but lamented fact, that many at least of the marks plainly photographed in the fac-simile, have since disappeared.

It appears that in order satisfactorily to photograph a book, it must be completely unbound, + the photographs taken sheet by sheet. For the sake of improving the appearance of the volume, the binders frequently clean or "wash" the sheets with chemicals which do not affect the printing, but which obliterate marks of writing ink. Mr. Roberts thinks it probable that several of the leaves in his copy have been thus washed. The result is as curious as disappointing, + presents us with this paradox. The reduced fac-simile of the original, is now, in the true sense, the original copy, whilst the original is no longer absolutely like its own fac-simile.

By the pernicious operation described, this precious folio has been deprived of many of the very marks which are of priceless value, interesting beyond description to the cryptographer.

It is in the hope of saving from a similar fate other marked copies of "Shakespeare", + also all marked or scribbled volumes of merit whatsoever, published during the 16th + 17th centuries, that I write this letter, the contents of which I request you to be so good as to impart to any of your friends who possess valuable old books, or who are in any way connected with the care of Libraries, or with the Arts or Trades relating to books. I shall be greatly obliged if any one who can give accurate information concerning marked copies, their owners, or their history, will communicate with me. It is in the highest degree improbable, that the Folio in question, hit upon by mere chance, + without any thought of ciphers or Secret Societies, should be the only marked + unwashed copy extant. We may fairly hope to discover others, especially in old private libraries, whose books, even if they suffer from the damp or the weavils, escape a worse fate at the hands of restorers. It seems at present un+ desirable to publish a detailed account of the signs by which the ciphers have been worked, lest dishonest or unscrupulous persons should be tempted to tamper with other copies. Let us hope that public interest may soon be sufficiently aroused to encourage industrious experts who are quietly working at this subject, to publish their results, + to secure intelligent + unjudging help in this newly revived branch of science-

Meanwhile I am glad of this opportunity for imparting to friends in distant countrey this unexpected confirmation of Mr. Donelly's statements. This fresh evidence is documentary, + admits of ocular demonstration, making assurance doubly sure as to the existence of a great + wonderful cipher-system, running through the whole of the "Shakespeare Folio of 1623", +, I believe, through a still larger group of works of the 16th + 17th centuries.

I am Sir

Faithfully Yours

Constance M. Pott-

Jany 30th 1889.