

Transcendentalist American lady, one of the ornaments of New England, and the age of Emerson, when our own colony was struggling into existence; and how she declared, with the true fervour of that remarkable age and that remarkable country, 'I accept the Universe'; and how Carlyle rather sourly commented, 'By God, she'd better!' Well, I thought, what else do you do with it? So I ignored it, except I suppose now and again as a visual display. I took it – the Universe, the Cosmos – for granted, the eternal silence of the immense spaces did not at all frighten me, I stuck my head in a book.

And of course they were books; or at least they looked like books. I don't know how you would define a book in our day. An instrument by which you hold high converse with the mighty dead? The precious life-blood of a master spirit? Or a small rectangular block of newsprint with a shiny cover bearing the picture of an undressed young lady? Not with such insubstantial sawdust were the great libraries of the past built. Who now will reissue, even with an undressed young lady outside it, Isaac Disraeli's *Curiosities of Literature*? It was entrancing. There you could learn of the great library of Alexandria, beloved of the Ptolemies, the accumulation of all classical learning, wisdom, poetry, given to the flames by uningratiating Christians. I wept for Alexandria. I steeped myself in Andrew Lang, *The Library*. I remember its size, a small octavo; the texture of its cover, a rough light-brown linen; the panelling on its spine, the feel of its paper, the disposal of its print. I believe that Andrew Lang was somewhat the dilettante, but how delightful he was on Elzevirs and Aldines, and incunabula; what fascination when he discussed the sort of wood the true devotee would make his bookshelves of! Elzevirs and Aldines, indeed. They seemed the pinnacle of felicity to me. Abstractions – but romance, romance. I had to admit that though my father's shelves were not of well-seasoned English oak they held the books well enough. I suppose that only Turnbull, in Wellington, could afford to worry about that sort of thing, and he worried to some purpose, with the aid of Mr Kupli, cabinet-maker, of Upper Willis Street. It used to be said, of course, by strict moralists, that you should not read books about books, that was the way to perdition; you should read books and cultivate depth of character and moral fibre, and all those things the late Victorians valued. Idiots! Slayers of delight and innocent dissipations! They would frown on walks in flowery meads, insist that one should be forever climbing mountains. Were books about books not the most agreeable way of being led on to the strict rigours of bibliographical study? And is there anything more gratifying to the mind, in the end, than the triumphant pedantry of distinguishing between the first impression of the first edition and the second impression of the first edition? I do not say that there is a virtue in this superior to the virtue of the really esoteric mathematician, or of the youth who