

return) are enriched by several examples of her skill. Here are the Letters of Charles Darwin (whom she had known), and Ruskin's *Præterita*, and Ruskin's *Giotto* – a fine example in pigskin, introducing the legendary O of Giotto and her own initials. The most ambitious of all her bindings – *The Rubiyât of Omar Khayyâm* – I gave away after her death to an oriental friend. I still miss that lovely book and wish I possessed it. I still see the charming design with which she decorated its cover – polo-players adapted from an ancient Persian miniature – a design for which the contemporary dust-jacket is a poor substitute.

However, I am contemporary myself and I must get on to myself and not linger amongst ancestral influences any longer. What did I bring to my library? Not much deliberately. I have never been a collector, and as for the first-edition craze, I place it next door to stamp-collecting – I can say no less. It is non-adult and exposes the book-lover to all sorts of nonsense at the hands of the book-dealer. One should never tempt book-dealers. I am myself a lover of the interiors of books, of the words in them – an uncut book is about as inspiring as a corked-up bottle of wine – and much as I enjoy good print and good binding and old volumes they remain subsidiary to the words: words, the wine of life. This view of mine is, I am convinced, the correct one. But even correctness has had its disadvantages, and I am bound to admit that my library, so far as I have created it, is rather a muddle. Here's one sort of book, there's another, and there is not enough of any sort of book to strike a dominant note. Books about India and by Indians, modern poetry, ancient history, American novels, travel books, books on the state of the world, and on the world-state, books on individual liberty, art-albums, Dante and books about him – they tend to swamp each other, not to mention the usual pond of pamphlets which has to be drained off periodically. The absence of the collector's instinct in me, the absence of deliberate choice, have combined with a commendable variety of interests to evolve a library which will not make any definite impression upon visitors.

I have not a bookplate – too diffident or too much bother. I cannot arrange books well either; shall it be by subjects or by heights? Shall a tall old Froissart stand beside *The Times Atlas*, or beside a tiny Philippe de Commines? I do not bang or blow them as much as I should, or oil their leather backs, or align those backs properly. They are unregimented. Only at night, when the curtains are drawn and the fire flickers, and the lights are turned off, do they come into their own, and attain a collective dignity. It is very pleasant to sit with them in the firelight for a couple of minutes, not reading, not even thinking, but aware that they, with their accumulated wisdom and charm, are waiting to be used, and that my library, in its tiny imperfect way, is a successor to the great private

libraries of the past. 'Do you ever lend books?' someone may say in a public-spirited tone of voice at this point. Yes, I do, and they are not returned, and still I lend books. Do I ever borrow books? I do, and I can see some of them unreturned around me. I favour reciprocal dishonesty. But the ownership of the things does give me peculiar pleasure, which increases as I get older. It is of the same kind, though not so strong, as the desire to possess land. And, like all possessiveness, it does not go down to the roots of our humanity. Those roots are spiritual. The deepest desire in us is the desire to understand, and that is what I meant just now when I said that the really important thing in books is the words in them – words, the wine of life – not their binding or their print, not their edition value or their bibliomaniac value, or their uncuttability.

One's favourite book is as elusive as one's favourite pudding, but there certainly are three writers whom I would like to have in every room, so that I can stretch out my hand for them at any moment. They are Shakespeare, Gibbon and Jane Austen. There are two Shakespeares in this library of mine and also two outside it, one Gibbon and one outside it, one Jane Austen and two outside it. So I am happily furnished. And, of course, I have some Tolstoy, but one scarcely wants Tolstoy in every room. Shakespeare, Gibbon and Jane Austen are my choice, and in a library one thinks of Gibbon most. Gibbon loved books but was not dominated by them. He knew how to use them. His bust might well stand on my grandfather's bookcase, to my grandfather's indignation.