

P R E F A C E.



WHEN Alfred was crowned king of Wessex, it seemed as if the Danes were to blot out not only the English power but the English tongue, and put Danish in the place of English throughout these islands. The same Alfred who made the first Cyclopædia of earlier English song and story saved the English land and folk and speech from Danish thralldom. The English language held its own when, later, Danish kings did rule the land; it showed its irrepressible vitality during three centuries of depression under Norman French supremacy, and triumphantly reasserted itself in greater flexibility and vigour than before. The area of its currency has grown with the political and commercial sway of the people who speak it. In Alfred's time the Low Dutch dialects called English, and spoken by a few hundred thousand islanders, were unknown outside the island. Queen Elizabeth ruled scarcely three million subjects, many of whom were not of English speech; while to many more in the north and west, who heard it or essayed to read it, Shakespeare's literary London dialect was barely intelligible. And now English, with no essential differences, is the mother-tongue of more than a hundred and twenty millions of men and women, scattered over all the quarters of the planet. Some fifty millions of Britons at home and abroad rule about a fourth of the inhabitants of the globe. In the United States the daughter nation now reckons her seventy-five millions, mainly of British stock, and, with trifling exceptions, all of English speech. To multitudes of the darker-skinned subjects of the British crown, English is only less familiar than their own vernaculars, and English literature a main instrument of education. English is becoming more and more the language of commerce among men of all kindreds. And the writings of English authors, now read and studied by the educated of all races, are an element of culture in every civilised country.

For it is not by reason of the vast numbers of those who speak it, or of the other myriads for whom it is a second vernacular, an indispensable *lingua franca*, that English claims rank amongst languages, but in virtue of the thoughts that breathe and burn in English words. English literature is in the fullest sense of the term a great literature; the English pen has been mightier than the English sword or the English steam-engine. Is it the irony of history that in the nation of shopkeepers one singer after another should be found endowed with a double portion of the spirit of poesy? And if it be said—as often it is said—that we are the most materialistic nation on the face of the earth, we have a cloud of witnesses to the contrary. our divines, our sages, our poets, our storytellers, our men of science, our historians, have uttered in our tongue words which the world will not willingly let die. It is no dream indeed that the other sheaves have made obeisance to our sheaf; Shakespeare is not the only Englishman who has won the willing homage of the world.

In that vast English library which has been steadily growing for fourteen hundred years, there is happily much that concerns us not, much that is no part of our national inheritance. There are more than enough of books that are no books, of literature that does not deserve the name, of poems that are not poetry, of prose which is a mere waste of weary words. Even so, of English books new and old that it is worth our while to know, or know about, there are many more than would suffice for a lifetime of hard reading. British publications multiply by thousands in a year, and American volumes at an almost equal rate. The flood, constantly swelling, threatens to engulf even the strongest swimmer. Year by year the need becomes greater for an approved mentor, a comprehensive guide; and such a Vademecum Dr Robert Chambers devised and called, not unjustly, a CYCLOPEDIA OF ENGLISH LITERATURE, the first of its kind in Britain.