

PREFACE.

THE object which this book is intended to serve is very simple, and may be explained in a few lines.

At the present day the number of books is infinite, and to the host of books should be added the great array of serials, weekly papers, daily papers, snippets, snaps and collections of extracts of all sorts and kinds which form the principal reading matter of the English-speaking peoples. It has been said that "in the multitude of counsellors there is wisdom." The statement comes to us on high authority, but its self-evident truth will not entirely commend itself to all minds. In the multitude of books, at any rate, there is often very little wisdom, and there are thousands of readers who, in their anxiety to know "something about everything," never come within measurable distance of knowing "everything about something." So superficial does the reading of many persons become that whole departments of knowledge—historical, literary, scientific—are represented in their minds only by a series of words and names which are used like counters or algebraical symbols to represent real values behind them. Unluckily, in playing the game, or doing the sum, the real values have in many cases dropped altogether out of sight and knowledge, and the players or calculators are quite unable to state their true nature and value. This state of things exists in relation to every branch of knowledge, but it is perhaps specially marked in the case of great books and great men. Out of ten thousand persons who talk about Homer and Virgil, not half a dozen are really familiar with the *Odyssey* or the *Æneid*. The expression "Milton" has become a counter representing a value which is admitted, but of which, as a rule, nothing whatever is known; and the catalogue of instances might be indefinitely extended, so common is the practice of playing literary counters which the players can never redeem.