SKETCHES

OF

ENGLISH LITERATURE.

INTRODUCTION.

THERE is no sight that more powerfully carries back the thoughts to the olden time than an old library. I do not mean merely an old building, nor a collection of old books,—not a show-place, nor an elaborate modern antique,—but a veritable library of the olden time. There is a sight of this kind at the little town of Wimborne, in Dorsetshire. The old Minster of that place, bearing witness to the architectural skill and taste both of the Saxon and the Norman era, has much to delight the antiquarian in its structure, its ornaments, its traces of successive enlargements, marked by obvious changes of style, its monuments, and its historical associations. But nothing to my mind was so interesting as a chamber in one of the

towers that was called "The Library." The room was square and well proportioned, though by no means large; two windows, of a sort of casement form, more suited to an old house than a church tower, and evidently very much more modern than the walls, admitted plenty of light; and round the three other sides of the room were rough-looking massive shelves, containing tarnished dilapidated books of all sorts, sizes, and colours, in clumsy but strong bindings, now sadly tattered, and in many cases dropping to pieces with age. Here were black-letter tomes — still older beautifully written manuscripts; specimens of early printing in the Roman character, that so soon triumphed over the black letter; a fine old polyglott Bible, in many volumes; and separate copies of the Scriptures — some in the original tongues, and some Latin, and early English, translations.

The greatest peculiarity, however, was not the books, but the way they were secured. An iron rod went along the edge of each shelf, and was fastened at the end by a huge padlock. Each book had a chain screwed on to one of the covers (as we often see the Bible fastened to the desk in very old churches), and at the other end of the chain was a ring that ran on the locked iron rod. For the convenience of reading any of these venerable volumes thus guarded from removal, there

was a portable desk and stool, which the reader could bring near any shelf, and, sitting sufficiently close for the chained book to rest upon the desk, he could peruse the volume there, and there only.

Nothing could appear more strange than the rusty iron chains hanging so thickly from the shelves — it seemed the prison rather than the home of the books. And this in olden times was the town library! It is probable that Wimborne was honoured above most towns of its size, not only by having its noble Minster, but by its possessing a public library of any kind. It is true that even from the early part of the sixteenth century it had a great advantage in its admirable school, which was founded by the illustrious Margaret Beaufort, the mother of Henry VII., a woman who was deservedly called "the Mother of the Students of the Universities." And the probability is, that the townspeople, as books slowly increased, were tolerably competent to understand, and likely to value them.

There is a fine copy of Sir Walter Raleigh's "History of the World" in this old library, and local tradition attaches an interesting anecdote to this book. It is said the poet Prior used to read here often; and once when poring over the book in question on a winter evening, he fell asleep, and the candle, falling from the tin sconce of the desk upon the middle of the open book, burned slowly

a round hole through it may be a hundred pages, rather more than less. The smoke of the smouldering paper aroused the weary student. A hand would have been sufficient to cover the damage and put out the fire, — and probably in this way it was extinguished. We may imagine, however, the dismay at the mischief done to a book, costly even now, but then of much higher monetary value. The pains taken to remedy the defect marks the value in which the book was held. Pieces of writing paper, about the size of half-a-crown, are very neatly pasted into the holes, and the words needed to supply the sense are transcribed from the memory, and, it is said, in the handwriting of Prior.

How strangely does this old library, with its rusty drapery of iron chains, hanging in dismal festoons from the shelves, contrast with the public libraries of the present time. And yet more remarkable, as a sign of intellectual progress, is the difference now in the price of books of the highest intrinsic value and importance. The chains are broken; the illustrious prisoners, so long fettered and kept from intercourse with the people, are free. They have spread over the land and multiplied, and found a welcome with high and low, rich and poor —

> "Their thoughts in many a memory,
> Their home in many a heart."

The danger to the reader in the present time, — the young reader more particularly, — does not arise from scarcity, but repletion. Copious, yet desultory, reading, without plan or system, is the error of the inexperienced in our day. Many love to linger near the stream of knowledge, yet care not to trace its course, and to note its fertilising progress: they have no systematic and consecutive notion of the rise and progress of modern literature. Many general readers, who have the most accurate chronological knowledge in reference to kings and queens, have but a confused notion of the eras that have occurred in literature, and their effects, not merely on the few, but on the many. A clear, plain, untechnical record and analysis of literature would be more a history of the peoples of the earth, their progress, their revolutions, and their decline, than any thing that is ordinarily dignified with the name of history: for, as it is thought that really governs the world, the greatest thinkers have been ultimately the mightiest rulers, and the noblest conquerors. Such a work, however, would not only demand universal knowledge and a philosophical mind in the writer, but time and study from the reader; conditions not often possessed by either. It occurred to me, however, in the old library at Wimborne Minster that a series of plain consecutive sketches, however rapid and panoramic,

of our literature, would be useful to general and to young readers, by collecting information for them which they would have had to seek from many varied sources, and giving them a clear and distinct, even if limited, view of the progress of mind in their own land from the middle of the fourteenth century.

It is not enough that we read the works of great men of former ages; it is necessary to our full appreciation and enjoyment of their writings that we know something of the times in which they lived, and of the books that preceded theirs. It will help us to a humbler view of our present attainments, and a fitter sense of our present responsibilities, when we behold the triumphs of mind, amid the difficulties of past ages, and what treasures of thought our ancestors bequeathed to us.

It will be an instructive, and I would hope interesting, part of this view taken of the progress of our literature, that the contributions from the mind of woman to the cause of human improvement are not left out, or slurred over, in these sketches. Those contributions prior to the last century, it will be found, were few in number, and not often first-rate in quality. But when we remember the comparatively limited education that woman has received, the paramount and ever-recurring duties of domestic life, and, more than

all, the law of opinion that operated to restrict her mental efforts, as much as her literary acquirements, the wonder is, not that woman in former ages contributed so little to our literature, but that she should have ventured to contribute at all.

Another thought that was suggested to me by the sight of the old library of chained books at Wimborne I venture to lay before my reader:—When the student had to go to his books, carrying desk and seat to the shelf where they were fastened, did he not value them all the more for the hinderances that impeded his easy enjoyment of their contents? Granted that the careless many neither could or would invade and share that prison, yet with what zest the studious few would pore over those manacled volumes, careless of the constrained attitude, the cold, the gloom, and the many discomforts that must then have condemned every student, whatever his station, to a "pursuit of knowledge under difficulties." Do we by our warm fire-sides,—in comfortable easy chairs,—books in abundance coming like a full tide into our dwellings,—do we read as carefully as students then read? Have we gained a full knowledge of the recorded thoughts of any of our great writers? Have we not skimmed and dipped, rather than read and reflected? and, while wisdom and expediency would both subscribe to Lord

Bacon's maxim, "Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested," yet, in our hasty examining, have we rightly discriminated as to the books we should taste, and those we should digest?

Responsibility and privilege are so linked together that none can be guiltless in separating them. If we have more ample means of knowledge than our ancestors, woe be to us if we have not also, as the result, more earnestness and more wisdom!

CHAPTER I.

THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY. — RETROSPECT. — ITALY: ITS INFLUENCE ON ENGLAND. — WICKLIFFE, CHAUCER, GOWER.

THE words "transition age" have passed into a current and popular phrase, often liable, from its very convenience, to be misapplied. We use the term frequently to describe changes of outward manifestation, rather than changes in the characteristics of a period. The fourteenth century may be pre-eminently called a transition age, because its changes have a distinctive character, as marking the transition from the primitive to the modern state of Europe. It was not the actions but the thoughts of that time that were memorable. There was strife, and struggle, and clamour every where, without effecting much immediately for man. Meanwhile a few illustrious thinkers were arising in the South of Europe, and lightening the darkness that had so long spread over the nations.

The important facts of the preceding ages of the Christian era may be comprised in a rapid summary: The decline of the Roman power in

the fifth century; the incursions, conquests, and final establishment of independent states by peoples of North and Central Europe, who had been called by one contemptuous phrase, "Barbarians," by the polished and luxurious Romans; the establishment of a Christian Church, not, as in the earlier ages, as a spiritual principle of union to be individually received by faith, but as a political institution of supreme authority; the feudal system; the institution of chivalry; and, lastly, the crusades. Of these, M. Guizot says with equal brevity and force, "They were the first *European event.* Before the crusades the different countries of Europe had never been simultaneously moved by the same cause, or actuated by the same sentiment. Europe as a whole did not exist. The crusades animated all Christian Europe. France supplied the greater portion of the first crusading army; but Germans, Italians, Spaniards, and English, were also found in its ranks. In the second and third crusades the whole of Christendom was engaged. Nothing like it had ever been seen before.

"This was not all: — Although the crusades were an European event, they were also a national event in each separate country; all classes were animated by the same impression, yielded to the same idea, and abandoned themselves to the same influence, Kings, nobles, priests, citizens, and