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HOURS IN A LIBRARY.

(FIRST SERIES.)

BY

LESLIE STEPHEN.

SECOND EDITION.

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L. S.



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DE FOE'S NOVELS.

ACCORDING to the high authority of Charles Lamb, it has sometimes happened 'that from no inferior merit in the rest, but from some superior good fortune in the choice of a subject, some single work' (of a particular author's) 'shall have been suffered to eclipse, and cast into the shade, the deserts of its less fortunate brethren.' And after quoting the case of Bunyan's 'Holy War' as compared with the 'Pilgrim's Progress,' he adds that, 'in no instance has this excluding partiality been exerted with more unfairness than against what may be termed the secondary novels or romances of De Foe.' He proceeds to declare that there are at least four other fictitious narratives by the same writer—'Roxana,' 'Singleton,' 'Moll Flanders,' and 'Colonel Jack'—which possess an interest

not inferior to 'Robinson Crusoe'—'except what results from a less felicitous choice of situation.' Granting most unreservedly that the same hand is perceptible in the minor novels as in 'Robinson Crusoe,' and that they bear at every page the most unequivocal symptoms of De Foe's workmanship, we venture to doubt the 'partiality' and the 'unfairness' of preferring to them their more popular rival. The instinctive judgment of the world is not really biassed by anything except the intrinsic power exerted by a book over its sympathies; and as in the long run it has honoured 'Robinson Crusoe,' in spite of the critics, and has comparatively neglected 'Roxana' and the companion stories, there is probably some good cause for the distinction. The apparent injustice to books resembles what we often see in the case of men. A. B. becomes Lord Chancellor, whilst C. D. remains for years a briefless barrister; and yet for the life of us we cannot tell but that C. D. is the abler man of the two. Perhaps he was wanting in some one of the less conspicuous elements that are essential to a successful career; he said, 'Open, wheat!' instead of 'Open, sesame!' and the barriers remained unaffected by his magic. The ordinary metaphor about the round pegs and the square holes requires to be supplemented. For a second-rate success it is enough to fix a round peg, with more or less accuracy, into a round

hole of about the right size; but for one of those successes which make a man famous at a blow you have to find a queer-shaped peg to match some strangely polygonal hole to a nicety. If the least corner runs out at a wrong angle the peg refuses to enter the hole, or, as we might rather say, the key refuses to enter the lock, and the gates of glory remain obstinately closed. Now, it may be that the felicitous choice of situation to which Lamb refers gave just the turn which fitted the key to the lock; and it is little use to plead that 'Roxana,' 'Colonel Jack,' and others might have done the same trick if only they had received a little filing, or some slight change in shape: a shoemaker might as well argue that if you had only one toe less his shoes wouldn't pinch you.

To leave the unsatisfactory ground of metaphor, we may find out, on examination, that De Foe had discovered in 'Robinson Crusoe' precisely the field in which his talents could be most effectually applied; and that a very slight alteration in the subject-matter might change the merit of his work to a disproportionate extent. The more special the idiosyncrasy upon which a man's literary success is founded, the greater, of course, the probability that a small change will disconcert him. A man who can only perform upon the drum will have to wait for certain combinations of other instruments before his special