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(SECOND SERIES.)

BY

LESLIE STEPHEN.

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I.

SIR THOMAS BROWNE.

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“LET me not injure the felicity of others,” says Sir Thomas Browne in a suppressed passage of the “*Religio Medici*,” “if I say that I am the happiest man alive. I have that in me that can convert poverty into riches, adversity into prosperity, and I am more invulnerable than Achilles; fortune hath not one place to hit me.” Perhaps, on second thoughts, Sir Thomas felt that the phrase savoured of that presumption which is supposed to provoke the wrath of Nemesis; and at any rate, he, of all men, is the last to be taken too literally at his word. He is a humorist to the core, and is here writing dramatically. There are many things in this book, so he tells us, “delivered rhetorically, many expressions therein

merely tropical, . . . and therefore also many things to be taken in a soft and flexible sense, and not to be called unto the rigid test of reason." We shall hardly do wrong in reckoning amongst them this audacious claim to surpassing felicity, as we may certainly include his boast that he "could lose an arm without a tear, and with few groans be quartered into pieces." And yet, if Sir Thomas were to be understood in the most downright literal earnest, perhaps he could have made out as good a case for his assertion as almost any of the troubled race of mankind. For, if we set aside external circumstances of life, what qualities offer a more certain guarantee of happiness than those of which he is an almost typical example? A mind endowed with an insatiable curiosity as to all things knowable and unknowable; an imagination which tinges with poetical hues the vast accumulation of incoherent facts thus stored in a capacious memory; and a strangely vivid humour that is always detecting the quaintest analogies, and, as it were, striking light from the most unexpected collocations of unpromising materials: such talents are by themselves enough to provide a man with work for life, and to make all his work delightful. To them, moreover, we must add a disposition absolutely incapable of controversial bitterness; "a constitution," as he says of himself, "so

general that it consorts and sympathises with all things;" an absence of all antipathies to loathsome objects in nature—to French "dishes of snails, frogs, and toadstools," or to Jewish repasts on "locusts or grasshoppers;" an equal toleration—which in the first half of the seventeenth century is something astonishing—for all theological systems; an admiration even of our natural enemies, the French, the Spaniards, the Italians, and the Dutch; a love of all climates, of all countries; and, in short, an utter incapacity to "absolutely detest or hate any essence except the devil." Indeed, his hatred even for that personage has in it so little of bitterness, that no man, we may be sure, would have joined more heartily in the Scotch minister's petition for "the *puir de'il*"—a prayer conceived in the very spirit of his writings. A man so endowed—and it is not only from his explicit assertions, but from his unconscious self-revelation, that we may credit him with closely approaching his own ideal—is admirably qualified to discover one great secret of human happiness. No man was ever better prepared to keep not only one, but a whole stableful of hobbies, nor more certain to ride them so as to amuse himself, without loss of temper or dignity, and without rude collisions against his neighbours. That happy art is given to

few, and thanks to his skill in it, Sir Thomas reminds us strongly of the two illustrious brothers Shandy combined in one person. To the exquisite kindness and simplicity of Uncle Toby he unites the omnivorous intellectual appetite and the humorous pedantry of the head of the family. The resemblance, indeed, may not be quite fortuitous. Though it does not appear that Sterne, amidst his multifarious pilferings, laid hands upon Sir Thomas Browne, one may fancy that he took a general hint or two from so congenial an author.

The best mode of approaching so original a writer is to examine the intellectual food on which his mind was nourished. He dwelt by preference in strange literary pastures; and their nature will let us into some secrets as to his taste and character. We will begin, therefore, by examining the strange furniture of his mind, as described in his longest, though not his most characteristic book—the “Inquiry into Vulgar Errors.” When we turn over its quaint pages, we feel as though we were entering one of those singular museums of curiosities which existed in the pre-scientific ages. Every corner is filled with a strange, incoherent medley, in which really valuable objects are placed side by side with what is simply grotesque

and ludicrous. The modern man of science may find some objects of interest; but they are mixed inextricably with strange rubbish that once delighted the astrologer, the alchemist, or the dealer in apocryphal relics. And the possessor of this miscellaneous collection accompanies us with an unfailing flow of amusing gossip: at one moment pouring forth a torrent of out-of-the-way learning; at another, making a really passable scientific remark; and then lapsing into an elaborate discussion of some inconceivable absurdity; affecting the air of a grave inquirer, and to all appearance fully believing in his own pretensions, and yet somehow indulging himself in a half-suppressed smile, which indicates that the humorous aspect of a question can never be far removed from his mind. Mere curiosity is not yet differentiated from scientific thirst for knowledge; and a quaint apologue is as good a reward for the inquirer as the discovery of a law of nature. The numerous class which insists upon a joke being as unequivocal as a pistol-shot, and a serious statement as grave as a Blue-book, should therefore keep clear of Sir Thomas Browne. His most congenial readers are those who take a simple delight in following out any quaint train of reflections, careless whether it may culminate in a smile