



The Life, Adventures Piracies of the Famous Captain Singleton

Daniel Defoe

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That all Defoe's novels, with the exception of "Robinson Crusoe," should have been covered with the dust of neglect for many generations, is a plain proof of how much fashions in taste affect the popularity of the British classics. It is true that three generations or so ago, Defoe's works were edited by both Sir Walter Scott and Hazlitt, and that this masterly piece of realism, "Captain Singleton," was reprinted a few years back in "The Camelot Classics," but it is safe to say that out of every thousand readers of "Robinson Crusoe" only one or two will have even heard of the "Memoirs of a Cavalier," "Colonel Jack," "Moll Flanders," or "Captain Singleton." It is indeed distressing to think that while many scores of thousands of copies of Lord Lytton's flashy romance, "Paul Clifford," have been devoured by the public, "Captain Singleton" has remained unread and almost forgotten. But the explanation is simple. Defoe's plain and homely realism soon grew to be thought vulgar by people who themselves aspired to be refined and genteel. The rapid spread of popular education, in the middle of last century, was responsible for a great many aberrations of taste, and the works of the two most English of Englishmen, Defoe and Hogarth, were judged to be hardly fitting for polite society, as we may see from Lamb's Essay on Hogarth, and from an early edition of Chambers's "Cyclopaedia of English Literature" (1843), where we are told: "Nor is it needful to show how elegant and reflective literature, especially, tends to moralise, to soften, and to adorn the soul and life of man." "Unfortunately the taste or circumstances of Defoe led him mostly into low life, and his characters are such as we cannot sympathise with. The whole arcana of roguery and villany seems to have been open to him...."

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