Defoe’s History of the Devil

I think it would be worth the trouble and worthy of the space of Notes and Queries to identify, as fully as we can before the world has got so old that its memory is gone, the innumerable characters - both those referred to by nicknames and those concealed by asterisks - whom Defoe alludes to in his chef-d’oeuvre. If I see this query inserted in your columns I will send one or two guesses of my own; but the task is probably far too difficult a one for any single hand to accomplish. It strikes me as curious (if I am right in believing) that while the victims of Pope’s satire are nearly all immortalised by name, no attempt has ever yet been made to do the same for Defoe’s, by far the sharper satirist of the two.

R. C. L.

For the sake of accuracy, which is one of the leading principles of Notes and Queries, may I enter a protest against any work of Defoe’s being called his chef-d’oeuvre, except our old and general favourite Robinson Crusoe? I would ask, what constitutes a masterpiece? and whether universal recognition of merit is not to be thrown into the scale along with the considerations that only influence the uncritical few? But even supposing that the popular voice is not always to be relied upon - a question which is open to wide discussion - in what respect can the History of the Devil be pronounced superior to Robinson Crusoe?

The point may scarcely be worth raising; but really there are so many newfangled ideas abroad just now, and they are for the most part so eagerly caught at, that it appears to me desirable at times to stand up and do battle on behalf of good old notions and institutions.

J. W. W.