

**LITTLE MASTERPIECES;
SELECTIONS
FROM HIS ESSAYS,
LETTERS AND VERSES**

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Little Masterpieces; Selections from His Essays, Letters and Verses by Charles Lamb

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CHARLES LAMB

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Charles Lamb.

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Editor's Introduction

THE only editorial discomfort in selecting a couple of hundred of Lamb's choicest pages has arisen from a sense of the excellence of those other pages that have not been taken. Even were the choice to be made from the "Essays of Elia" alone, the chooser must needs stand like a boy under an apple-tree, with pockets stuffed already, and yet eyeing and comparing and half tempted to trade his plunderings for some of the fruit still hanging on the tree,—so hazardous is this business of making sure that one has the best. To justify in set terms one's instinctive preference among the delicate-flavoured fruitage of Lamb's genius is a still more difficult task, and perhaps not altogether worth doing, even were it possible.

In casting about for some word or other of preface, however, it occurred to the editor to consult the latest literary handbook and discover how Lamb was faring nowadays at the hands of the professional critics. He found first some five pages of Biography,—all about the Temple and Christ's Hospital, the South Sea House, the India House, the home life,

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tragic and gay, the publication of essays and verses, the long holiday at last and the quiet ending; then three closely-printed pages of Bibliography on Lamb's style; and finally, the following ten Particular Characteristics, each vouched for by various competent critics and proved by illustrative examples: 1. Quaintness—Fondness for the Antique. 2. Tenderness—Sympathy with Humanity. 3. Graceful Ease—Companionability. 4. Amiable Humour. 5. Wit—Epigram—Paronomasia. (This last, O unclassical reader, means that Lamb liked to make puns;—and they were the worst, that is to say, the best, in the world!) 6. Self-Reflection—Unselfish Egoism. 7. Delicate Fancy. 8. Melancholy. 9. Critical Acumen. 10. Discursiveness.

To all who love Particular Characteristics the foregoing list is warmly commended. It has been borrowed without leave and is reproduced here with a kind of awe. For in the two editions of Lamb which the editor knows best there are marginal comments in great plenty, and yet nothing whatever is said about Particular Characteristics. One edition is a tattered paper-bound affair, with boyish pencil marks drawn long and black along the margin of many a delicious paragraph. The other, still more highly prized, is annotated throughout in the minute beautiful handwriting of that lover of Lamb's memory and fit companion for Lamb himself, the late Professor Dodd of

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Williams College. But even in those luminous and scholarly footnotes there is nothing about Graceful Ease or Amiable Humour or Critical Acumen. Professor Dodd was somewhat old-fashioned in his tastes, and never had the advantage of Laboratory Courses in literature.

To confess the truth, this little volume is equally innocent of any disciplinary intention. It is not designed to train the critical faculties of anybody. It is meant to be slipped into the pocket and pulled out when one feels like reading Lamb. The nine "Essays of Elia" which it contains are among the most delightful of that rare company and are fairly representative of the range of Lamb's moods and tastes. Some of them, like "Dream-Children" and "The Superannuated Man," are frankly autobiographical, and all of them, it is needless to say, have a good deal of Lamb in them. To one reading him for the first time they will prove, it is hoped, a happy introduction, and they contain many of those passages which old friends of one of the friendliest of writers find themselves reading over and over with a perpetually renewed and deepened pleasure.

A distinctive feature of the book is the inclusion of a dozen or more of Lamb's letters, which have not hitherto been put within easy reach of the general public. These letters not only, as Mr. Birrell has remarked, "do the reader good by stealth," but explain many facts and motives of Lamb's life that would other-

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wise be misinterpreted. It has been thought best to print here even those two most personal letters to Coleridge concerning the great tragedy of the Lamb household, because without a knowledge of Lamb's domestic circumstances the sweetness and heroism of his nature cannot be fully perceived. The letters to his friends Manning, Wordsworth, Bernard Barton and others, reflect the surroundings of Lamb's later life and make more complete the expression of a lovable personality.

Lamb's poetry is now little read, but some of it is so graceful and felicitous that a volume of selections from his writings should certainly include a few specimens of his verse. I have chosen the "Farewell to Tobacco" (it was not a very long farewell, by the way!) the daintily lyrical lines entitled "She is Going," and "The Old Familiar Faces," whose simple, haunting pathos has given it a secure immortality among English minor poetry.

BLISS PERRY.

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