

CHARLES LAM'S CHARACTER SKETCHES

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When we read *Essays of Elia*, we come across many queer figures, whose characteristic peculiarities, eccentricities, or foibles are drawn with such a mastery and flexible hand, that they leave an indelible mark upon our minds as unforgettable creatures. To add to their charm, they are mostly very lovable. They are so lovable, in spite of their peculiar habits, that we would drown our worldly cares and concerns, if possible, in their company. From what, then, comes this strong attachment to these figures? We might attribute it to Lamb's deep sympathy and understanding, combined with his Shakespearean humour, which give to these odd fishes a warm and genial colouring that endears them to our hearts.

Now about Lamb's gentle nature and warm heart many stories are told. He could not hate anyone. He knew we are bundles of frailties and foibles. He always saw men as creatures of good and evil in conflict. Thus it is said that he said after one of Hazlitt's lapses from right citizenship, "No, he is not a bad man, but he commits bad actions." Truly it is, as Lucas says, a verdict of singular kindness and discernment. Because Lamb is blessed with such an angelic nature, it is quite natural that all the creatures he deals with should be looked upon as living human flesh and blood with many foibles and defects that must be treated with great tolerance and lenience.

Sometimes he gives one whole essay to the description of one peculiar

character, as in *Amicus Redivivus*, and in *Captain Jackson*, and sometimes he draws many characters in one essay, as in *The South Sea House*, and in *Christ's Hospital*. In the description of these queer figures, he never misses the salient feature of each character, and when many characters appear in one essay, he is clever enough to heighten the effect of the peculiarities of each character by contrast. Thus we feel as if we were enjoying a fine comedy heartily when reading these essays. So great is Lamb's power of dramatic characterization that these characters win permanence in our hearts as unforgettable figures.

Now let us consider with what skill and with what perspicacity and sympathy he describes these figures. First we will turn to *The South-Sea House*. Lamb, on leaving school at fifteen, worked here for six months, and he wrote this essay at the age of forty-five. In spite of the extremely short duration in which he served this house, his portraiture is very vivid, so one may infer that much information must have been supplied by his brother, John Lamb, who served there, too, and rose to the position of accountant, or from observations made at John Lamb's evening parties, as Lucas says in the *Life of Charles Lamb*. This inference may be correct, but despite this fact, we are struck with Lamb's wonderful power of character delineation.

Lamb first gives the general characteristics of these figures. He describes them "mostly as bachelors of a curious and speculative turn of mind." He adds further that "as they were, for the most part, placed in this house in ripe or middle age, they necessarily carried into it their separate habits and oddities."

Next comes a splendid passage sparkling with wonderful phrases. It runs as follows:—

"Hence they formed a sort of Noah's ark. Odd fishes. A lay monastery. Domestic retainers in a great house, kept more for show than use".

In the above quotation the expression "a sort of Noah's ark" is superb. It suggests to us both the variety of species and the remoteness of time. Thus these words exactly fit the description of the odd and old inmates of this antiquated building. The word 'lay-monastery' is suggestive of celibacy and old age characterizing these queer figures, who were "kept more for show than use." We are made to smile at the expression "kept more for show than use", for the association with these words is usually commodities, not human beings. They also suggest the shadowy and hoary existences living on the bubbles and foams of the South-Sea House. You see how splendid the cumulative effects of these proper terms are.

After this generalization comes the description of the cashier, Evans.

"Melancholy as a gib-cat over his counter all the forenoon I think I see him, making up his cash (as they call it) with tremulous fingers, as if every one about him was a defaulter; in his hypochondry ready to imagine himself one; haunted, at least, with the idea of the possibility of his becoming one; his tristful visage clearing up a little over his roast neck of veal at Anderston's at two, but not attaining the meridian of its animation till evening brought on the hour of tea and visiting."

Here is given a detailed and humorous picture of this odd cashier. The picture is so vivid that one would feel as if one were seeing the figure on the stage. We cannot help smiling at the image presented by the words "melancholy as a gib-cat". These words come from *I Henry*

IV. An old cat sitting in the dark corner, shutting his eyes and with a melancholy face is a fit image for a man in the vale of years. His scrupulous and punctilious habits ranging over many years drove him to extreme nervousness and sensitiveness. Naturally he even felt himself to be a defaulter. Thus one may say he was in a chronic state of nervous prostration. The expression "his tristful visage, etc." is cleverly put. "Tristful visage" is a quotation from Hamlet. In it the human face is compared to the surface of the sun that is brightened or darkened according to the existence or absence of the clouds. The image is surprisingly vivid. Then, too, the word "meridian" forms a striking contrast to "evening", redoubling the effect of the word "meridian".

This old, melancholy figure, however, would lose more than half of his attractiveness if it were not for his peculiar habit of punctuality, shown in the following passage:—

"The simultaneous sound of his well-known rap of the door with the stroke of the clock announcing six, was a topic of never-failing mirth in the families which this dear old bachelor gladdened with his presence."

Punctiliousness leading in its excessiveness to oddity is ingeniously couched in the above quotation. Evans' punctilious habit crept into his daily life, crowning all his oddities. On account of this eccentricity, we may say that this old bachelor gains permanence in our hearts, appealing to our delicate sense of humour, rather than to our coarse sense of cachinnation, because of the honesty of purpose shown in this peculiar habits.

Next appears Thomas Tame, who worked under Evans. Here Lamb produces quite a different type of character. He had the air and stoop of a nobleman, and Lamb gives a detailed description of this stoop,

giving his own explanation of this corporal curvature.

"By stoop I mean that gentle bending of the body forwards, which, in great men, must be supposed to be the effect of an habitual condescending attention to the applications of their inferiors. While he held you in converse, you felt strained to the height in the colloquy. The conference over, you were at leisure to smile at the comparative insignificance of the pretensions which had just awed you."

In this Tame's stooped figure is humorously and fancifully described. In the mind's eye one would see a comical picture of an old bachelor stooping over a short man, who, strained to the height, is trying to speak to him. The comical effect is brought to its height when this short man knows the truth, released from the spell under which influence he has been. Here, we find a quotation from Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and we see how appositely it is used. The quotation is "strained to the height."

Our risible nerves, however, are tickled to the utmost when we learn that this gentleman with a condescending habit had a very shallow intellect. It did not reach to a saw, or a proverb. His mind was in its original state of white paper. Then from what cause came his stoop? Did it come from his affluence? No! Then from what?

Lamb unravels this mystery in a very fanciful way, and says it came from his wife's relationship with a noble family.

"She traced her descent, by some labyrinth of relationship, which I never thoroughly understood—much less can explain with any heraldic certainty at this time of day,—to the illustrious but unfortunate house of Derwentwater. This was the secret of Thomas's stoop.

This was the thought—the bright solitary star of your lives—ye mild

and happy pair—which cheered you in the night of intellect, and in the obscurity of your station! This was to you instead of riches, instead of rank, instead of glittering attainments; and it was worth all together.”

In England, where, as in Japan, good lineage or rank is everything, the possessor of even a mere fragment or shred of nobility may well be proud of it. Lamb ingeniously connects his stoop with this weakness of all Englishmen, or rather common to all men, not to make us guffaw, but to make us feel the deep pathos in our inmost hearts for this poor, simple pair in the night of intellect. His sole pride lay in his good lineage. It was everything to him, but the noble blood he was proud of came by some labyrinth of relationship with a house now sunk in misfortune. The word “labyrinth” is humorously but dexterously used. It expresses very effectively our weakness. People in general earnestly wish, for their vanity demands it keenly, to connect themselves with a noble family or a house of distinction even when they enjoy the remotest connection with that family or house. This desire may be more irresistible when one is very poor. The man who in the night of intellect clung to his shred of honour as a drowning man will catch at a straw presents a pitiable picture in one sense, but when we see that this picture is an exaggerated picture of one of our own weaknesses, our contempt may be turned into thoughtful sympathy. Lamb never failed to see this truth. Naturally the words given above are not words of derision, but of fellow-feeling.

Here Lamb’s flexible pen turns, to give us never-failing entertainment, to the description of a figure quite contrary to the former in character. Now on the stage appears John Tibbs, the then accountant.

Lamb's description of the fellow is as follows :—

“He neither pretended to high blood, nor, in good truth, cared one fig about the matter. He thought an accountant the greatest character in the world, and himself the greatest accountant in it.”

Such an introduction to this character compels us to take an unusual interest in this figure, for he never cared a fig about the nobility of blood, as the former character did. Now we see on the stage the very incarnation of an accountant. His pretensions to his ability as an accountant was appalling. From such a character we may not expect any connection with refined or graceful accomplishments. But contrary to our expectations, he was a devotee to music. He was a player of the fiddle.

“He sang, certainly, with other notes to the Orphean lyre. He did, indeed, scream and scrape most abominably.”

These words show what kind of player he was. The alliteration in “scream and scrape” is effectively used to describe the most discordant sounds produced by him. His partiality for music, however, was so great that his rooms were often turned into a music hall. Thus his fine suite of official rooms were resounded fortnightly to the notes of a concert of “sweet breasts”, who ate his cold mutton and drank his punch and praised his ears. He sat like Lord Midas among them”.

When we contrast the words “praised his ears” with “He did, indeed, scream and scrape most abominably” we draw a more comical picture than this? He played the fool literally. We must not forget, that it shows what a good-natured man he was.

Though he was such a lover of music, he was not without a very deplorable weakness. It was his cowardice.

"There is a cowardice which we do not despise, because it has nothing base or treacherous in its elements; it betrays itself, not you; it is mere temperament; the absence of the romantic and the enterprising; it sees a lion in the way, and will not, with Fortinbras, greatly find quarrel in a straw, when some supposed honour is at stake."

Lamb, with his apposite quotation from *Hamlet* pleads for cowardice, using his own logic. He takes us by surprise with the expression "There is a cowardice which we do not despise," and then he gives various explanations to justify and corroborate his extreme prudence and courage. Here we notice an instance of the subtle and ingenious methods employed by Lamb in the treatment of his characters.

The figures given above are the principal characters that appear in *The South-Sea House*. Now I will introduce to you another strange figure that far surpasses the above mentioned characters in his oddities and eccentricities. The character Lamb treats twice in his essays: in *Oxford in the Vacation* and in *Amicus Redivivus*. In the latter essay the whole article is devoted to the description of this odd fish. His name is George Dyer. He was a friend of Lamb's. He wrote *History of University and Colleges of Cambridge* and published *Poems*, which did not sell. He was a good scholar, and an antiquarian, too. But his name was given immortality by Lamb's pen. E.V. Lucas writes of him as follows:—

"Lamb conferred the patent of immortality on many of his friends; certainly on G.D. But for certain letters, and the two *Elia* essays *Oxford in the Vacation* and *Amicus Redivivus*, George Dyer's name would now be unknown. As it is, we know more of him than of many of our living acquaintances."

Lamb in his letter to Wordsworth (1800) says,

“George Dyer is the only literary character I am happily acquainted with. The oftner I see him, the more deeply I admire him. He is goodness itself. If I could but calculate the precise date of his death, I would write a novel on purpose to make George the hero. I could hit him off to a hair.”

As Lamb says, he was goodness itself and he could not say an ill word of nay one as Lamb himself could not. Once when he was asked the opinion of a cold-blooded assassin of two families, named Williams, he replies after due thought “He must be rather an eccentric character.”

Being such a lovable character, Lamb took a fancy to George Dyer, and describing his eccentricities in various ways, immortalized his name in English literature. What characterized him most was his absence of mind. Lamb describes in a minute way the famous anecdote connected with this peculiar feature of his. The anecdote refers to George Dyer’s visit to one of his friends. He found no one at home, and after being ushered into the hall, he asked for pen and ink with which to write his name in the book used for this purpose, when the master was absent. He then took his leave with many ceremonies and professions of regret. If this had been all, Lamb would have lost one of his most famous passages. Lamb was fortunate. He describes the latter part of this incident as follows:—

“Some two or three hours after, his walking distinnies returned him into the same neighbourhood again, and again the quiet image of the fireside circle at M’s— Mrs. M. presiding at it like a Queen Lar, with pretty A. S. at her side—striking irresistibly on her fancy, he makes another call (forgetting that they were certainly not to return from

the country before that day week), and disappointed a second time, inquires for pen and paper as before; again the book is brought and in the line just above that in which he is about to print his second name (his re-script)—his first name (scarcely dry) looks out upon him like another Sosia. Or as if a man should suddenly encounter his own duplicate!”

This might be an unparalleled example of complete absence of mind.

Even to such an absent-minded person as George Dyer the experience was extremely bitter. Lamb writes in this way about it:—

“The effect may be conceived. D. made many a good resolution against any such lapses in future. I hope he will not keep them too rigorously.”

Here Lamb’s words are significant. He rather hopes that such lapses may be repeated. Why? The reason is given in the following terms:—

“For with G. D.—to be absent from the body, is sometimes (not to speak profanely) to be present with the Lord. At the very time when personally encountering thee, he passes on with no recognition—or, being stopped, starts like a thing surprised—at that moment, Reader, he is on Mount Tabor—or Parnassus—or co-sphered with Plato—.”

To Lamb this eccentric figure was not a butt of derision, but an object of veneration and sympathy. He could enter the scholastic mind of George Dyer himself being as learned and inclined a little to that abstraction sometimes. Here we see the word “absent” is effectively contrasted with “present.” There are also quotations from, and allusions to, *Hamlet*, *Comedy of Errors*, and the Bible, characteristic of his own style.

At the end of this essay we find an interesting passage written for this unearthly creature. It is interesting because it is partly directed to Lamb himself, for George Dyer was the exaggerated counterpart of himself. Naturally there is something in that passage that moves us deeply. The passage is as follows:—

“And D. has been under-working for himself ever since;—drudging at low rates for unappreciating book-sellers,—wasting his fine erudition in silent correction of the classics, and in those unostentatious but solid services to learning which commonly fall to the lot of laborious scholars, who have not the heart to sell themselves to the best advantage. He has published poems, which do not sell, because he has been too much absorbed in ancient literature to know what the popular mark in poetry is, even if he could have hit it.”

This strange fellow Dyer, appears again in the essay *Amicus Redivivus*, where his absence of mind, as before, plays a trick upon him and he “with staff in hand and at noon day, deliberately marched right forwards into the midst of stream that runs by the Lambs, and totally disappears.” The minute details of this unhappy accident are described with a masterly stroke, to immortalize, combined with the other case of the absence of mind, his name in the literary world, not, ironically enough, by the fruits of his lucubration, but by his eccentric habits.

Lamb, who had also a strong partiality for ancient literature, and who wrote poems forgotten save one or two, could look upon Dyer, in spite of his eccentricities, or rather because of these lovable eccentricities, with deep sympathy and esteem. The reason he mentions him twice in his essays is to make his name dear to the hearts of the people who read them.

Having dwelt rather long on George Dyer, I will now turn to a different type of character, that is, schoolmasters. A little reflection will show you that in the literary world teachers, scholars, or parsons, have often been made butts of derision and contempt by the *vulgas mobile*, on account of their lack of worldly wisdom. As we have already seen, George Dyer is one of these characters. In Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost*, we see Holofernes (who is said to be a caricature of John Florio (? 1553-1625)) satirized as a good example of a pedant. Dominie Sampson, the tutor in *Guy Mannering* by Scott is unforgettable. Parson Adams in Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* is also full of eccentricities and very often causes us to split our sides.

In *The Old and New Schoolmaster*, Lamb mentions a teacher who embarrassed him by asking many questions which baffled him completely. It was quite natural that Lamb should have failed to answer his questions, because this pedagogue asked him whether he had even made any calculation as to the value of the rental of all the retail shops in London, or what song the Syrens sang, or what name Achilles assumed when he hid himself, etc. After mentioning these hard experiences with a teacher, he gives his own view of teachers in general, and says aptly and cogently, "The modern schoolmaster is expected to know a little of everything, because his pupil is required not to be entirely ignorant of anything. He must be superficially, if I may so say, omniscient," or "He is awkward, and out of place in the society of his equals. He comes like Gulliver from among his little people, and he cannot fit the stature of his understanding to yours. He is so used to teaching, that he wants to be teaching *you*," or "He is forlorn among his coevals; his juniors cannot be his friends"

A vivid picture of pedagogues teaching in classes, however, is given in *Christ's Hospital*. Here the description of idiosyncracies of individual teachers are very distinct and minute. The principal characters here are Matthew Field and James Boyer. To add to the jest of the comedy played by these figures, they were quite contrary in disposition. Lamb, giving prominence to the salient features of each character, shows a very vivid picture of the pedagogues diametrically opposed in nature. The fact that their teaching was given in the same room heightens the effect of contrast all the more strongly.

"Field never used the rod; and in truth he wielded the cane with no great good will—holding it like a dancer! It looked in his hand rather like an emblem than an instrument of authority; and an emblem, too, he was ashamed of."

By this description we know that Field was a meek and gentle creature quite contrary to the general type of teachers in those days. The word "emblem" is effectively contrasted with the word "instrument", the latter reminding us of the frequent use of this means of castigation.

That he was a very happy-go-lucky fellow is evident from the following passage:—

"He was a good, easy man, that did not care to ruffle his own peace, nor perhaps set any great consideration upon the value of juvenile time. He came among us now and then, but often staid away whole days from us."

Judging from this description, he seems to have been very negligent of his duty as a teacher. Only his whim seems to have decided whether he was to give lessons or not. The words "not to ruffle his

own peace" expresses very humorously the indolent and selfish nature of this teacher. He always consulted his own mood and conscience. His pupils came next. Under such an easy-going teacher pupils never made any progress in their studies. Naturally his highest form seldom proceeded further than two or three of the introductory fables of Phaedrus."

Such indolence would find no position in the present-day world of education, but what an earthly-paradise it would provide to young scholars! Perhaps the occasional existence of such happy-go-lucky teachers would not be harmful, or rather they might be salubrious to the mental and physical health of juveniles.

It is no wonder, therefore, that Lamb should recall these days with fond recollections.

"The Rev. Matthew Field presided over that portion of the apartment, of which I had the good fortune to be a member. We lived a life as careless as birds. We talked and did just what we pleased, and nobody molested us. There was now and then the formality of saying a lesson, but if you had not learned it, a brush across the shoulder (just enough to disturb a fly) was the sole remembrance."

The expression "a brush across the shoulder, etc." is very humorous, but impressive. The whole character of the teacher is shown in bold relief.

Boyer presented a good contrast to this meek, but indolent teacher, who was popular with his pupils, who were as indolent as their master, or perhaps more so.

Boyer was very anxious to interfere in a province not his own, but did not. His only means of retaliation to this indolent teacher and his

pupils was to borrow a rod of Feild's and with a Sardonic grin, say to one of his upper boys "How neat and fresh the twigs look!" He could pacify his fume only in this way. Sometimes Boyer would fly into a passion, and his class would tremble with fear, while Lamb's class enjoyed peace, being away from the influence of his anger. This scene is finely expressed by Lamb as follows:—

‘His thunders rolled innocuous for us; his storms came near, but never touched us; contrary to Gideon's miracle, while all around were drenched, our fleece was dry.’

Here the similarity of association with regard to teachers between England and Japan amuses us, for in this country, as in England, we say the thunder rolls when a teacher gets angry with his pupils.

Even this thunderous master had once to confess he was beaten, when one of his pupils, having been caught putting the inside of the master's desk to a use for which the architect had not designed it, averred that he did not know that the thing had been forewarned. This home thrust obliged him to drop his uplifted hand in which his rod was firmly grasped. Lamb describes this in this way:—

“This exquisite irrecognition of any law antecedent to the *oral* or *declaratory*, struck so irresistibly upon the fancy of all who heard it (the pedagogue himself not excepted) that remission was unavoidable.”

Now I have shown you some of the characters drawn by Charles Lamb in his *Essays of Elia*, to demonstrate his power of dramatic characterization.

Though there may be more or less an exaggeration and an embellishment in his delineation of these characters, his perspicacity never fails to catch hold of the characteristic features of each figure and though

they are clad in respective motleys of idiosyncracies, they are bathing in the genial light of sympathy and understanding by Charles Lamb, who knew what bundles of weaknesses and foibles human beings are. He knew that what he saw in others were nothing but his own reflections. To him, other people were, so to speak, mirrors raised to reflect his own image. Here is warm sympathy, which leads ultimately to a deep sense of humour. This sense of humour gives a warm colouring to every character he draws, and causes us to retain its cherished memory in our hearts for ever.

As for antique phrases and innumerable quotations and allusions, which some may not take kindly to, let Lamb himself plead for them. He says:—

“Crude they are, I grant you— a sort of unlicked, incondite things— villainously pranked in an affected array of antique modes and phrases. They had not been *his*, if they had been other than such; and better it is, that a writer should be natural in a self-pleasing quaintness, than to affect a naturalness (so called) that should be strange to him.”

Briefly put, these words mean, “*De gustibus non disputandum*,” which also expresses the reason for my writing this short article on Lamb’s character sketches.