The Open Court

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

Founded by EDWARD C. HEGELER

Vol. XXXVII NOVEMBER, 1923 No. 810

CONTENTS

PAGE

Frontispiece. CHARLES LAMB.

The Religious Opinions of Charles Lamb. DUDLEY WRIGHT 641

Will and Conscience. CHARLES PLATT 648

A Forgotten Utopia. JOHN WILSON TAYLOR 659

Justice and Social Efficiency. HARDIN T. MCCLELLAND 671

Client By a Client. F. VON A. CABEEN 675

The American Pulpit on the Death of Lincoln (Concluded).
WILLIAM E. BARTON 682

The Open Court Publishing Company

122 S. Michigan Ave. Chicago, Illinois

Per copy, 20 cents (1 shilling). Yearly, $2.00 (in the U.P.U., 9s. 6d.)

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THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS

5832 Ellis Avenue **CHICAGO, ILLINOIS**

CHARLES LAMB

Frontispiece to the Open Court.

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VOL. XXXVII (No. 11) NOVEMBER, 1923 No. 810

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THE RELIGIOUS OPINIONS OF CHARLES LAMB

BY DUDLEY WRIGHT

SOME of the most erratic and contradictory statements have been made with regard to the religious opinions of Charles Lamb. In an official publication of the British and Foreign Unitarian Association, as well as in the *Life* by B. W. Procter (Barry Cornwall), he is claimed as a Unitarian by education and habit, whilst W. Carew Hazlitt, though admitting that Lamb adopted Unitarianism, claims that he did so through the accident of education. These statements are opposed to fact and the evidence of Lamb's letters. Admission to Christ's Hospital, where Lamb spent several years of his early life, was, until well within the last half-century, limited strictly to members of the Church of England, and a certificate of baptism had to be produced before a boy could gain admission.

At Christ's Hospital, Lamb did steady work and, according to Leigh Hunt, Southey, and others, attained to the rank of Deputy Grecian. His achievements merited an exhibition, but one of the implied conditions of acceptance was preparation for Holy Orders. Lamb was unable to accept, not by reason of any religious opinions which he held or to which he was unable to subscribe, but because of his unfortunate impediment in speech—the same bar to Leigh Hunt's acceptance of the like distinction. It is evident that, at that time, Lamb must have been nominally, at any rate, a member of the Established Church. His inability to accept the exhibition explains why he did not pass on to Cambridge, as did Valentine Le Grice, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and other of his school companions. As Talfourd has said:

> This acquiescence in his different fortunes must have been a hard trial for the sweetness of his disposition; as he always, in after life, regarded the ancient seats of learning with the fondness of one who had been hardly divorced from them. He delighted when other duties did not hinder, to pass his vacations in their neighborhood and indulge in that fancied association with them which he has so beautifully mirrored in his "Sonnet written at Cambridge."

There is no hint of any inclination towards Unitarianism until after Lamb had left Christ's Hospital. His new opinions were undoubtedly the outcome of the influence of one who was to be a life-long friend—Samuel Taylor Coleridge, although another force in that direction may have been his aunt Hetty, with whom, in 1796, he used to attend the chapel at Hackney, of which Thomas Belsham was minister. Of this preacher, famous in Unitarian annals, he writes rather disparagingly in one of his letters, when he speaks of him as discoursing glibly of the attributes of the word "God" in the pulpit, when he says he "will talk of infinity with a tongue that dangles from a skull that never reached in thought and thorough imagination two inches, or further than from his hand to his mouth, or from the vestry to the soundingboard of the pulpit." The opinion of Miss Flora Masson that Lamb influenced Coleridge towards Unitarianism is in opposition to Lamb's own statement, for, in a letter to Coleridge on 28th January, 1798, he wrote:

To you I owe much under God. In my brief acquaintance with you in London, your conversation won me to the better course and rescued me from the polluting spirit of the world. I might have been a worthless character without you: as it is, I do possess a certain improvable portion of devotional feelings, though when I view myself in the light of divine truth and not according to the measures of human judgment, I am altogether corrupt and sinful. This is no cant. I am very sincere.

Coleridge, says Hazlitt, adopted Unitarianism as the result of a strong conviction; "so strong that, with all the ardor of a convert, he sought to win proselytes to his chosen creed and purposed to spend his days in preaching it."

There is further evidence of Coleridge's influence over Lamb. In the earlier half of 1796, Lamb was himself a victim to an attack of insanity and in December of that year he wrote to Coleridge:

I almost burned your letters—I did as bad, I lent 'em to a friend to keep out of my brother's sight, should he come and make inquisition into our papers; for, much as he dwelt upon your conversation while you were among us, and delighted to be with you, it has been his fashion ever since to depreciate and cry you down: you were the cause of my madness—you and your "damned foolish sensibility and melancholy"; and he lamented with a true brotherly feeling that we ever met.

Coleridge evinced great admiration for Priestley. In some verse written 1794-6, there occurs the following:

Lo, Priestley there, patriot, and saint, and sage,
Whom that my fleshly eye hath never seen,
A childish pang of impotent regret
Hath fill'd my heart.

By January, 1797, however, the pupil had outstripped his master, for Lamb then was "re-re-reading Priestley's Examination of the Scotch Doctors," which he recommended Coleridge to procure "and be exquisitely amused." A few days later, in another letter to Coleridge, he refers to "Priestley, whom I sin in almost adoring." In the same epistle he claims Wesley as an elevated character. He also begs his spiritual mentor to confirm him "in the faith of that great and glorious doctrine"—Necessarianism. He had just been reading Priestley "On Philosophical Necessity."

Because there is no record of his attendance at public worship later in life, Talfourd (himself a Unitarian until he was made a sergeant-at-law) and others have concluded that Lamb changed his opinions. The evidence is almost entirely opposed to such deduction. Coleridge, it is common knowledge, reverted to Trinitarianism and preached his last sermon as a Unitarian in the chapel of William Hazlitt, senior. Other of Lamb's friends—Hazlitt, Leigh Hunt, and George Dyer—were also Unitarians, the two last-named, old Christ's Hospital scholars, admittedly converts.

Much capital has been made of the famous Elian epistle "Unitarian Protests," which appeared first of all in the *London Magazine* for February, 1825, which may have led Hazlitt to the conclusion that Lamb, in his maturer life, "evinced no sympathy with the professors of his once-loved creed." The explanation of this epistle is as follows: In order that a marriage between Unitarians—then sometimes described as Freethinking Christians—might be legalized it was necessary for the ceremony to be performed in one of the churches of the Establishment, and occasionally the contracting parties would deposit a "Protest" with the clergyman in the vestry after the performance. This practice aroused the ire of Lamb, who regarded the act as contemptible, especially when compared with the sturdy Protestantism of the Quakers—"No penalties could have driven *them* into the churches." The month prior to the publication of this essay, Lamb wrote to Miss Hutchinson, Wordsworth's sister-in-law, a letter in which he said: "In the next number I figure as a theologian! and have attacked my late brethren, the Unitarians. What Jack-Pudding tricks I shall play next, I know not: I am almost at the end of my tether." Whatever he may have intended to convey to Miss Hutchinson by the expression "late brethren," he certainly did not mean that he had become a Trinitarian in belief, for more than six years later—on 24th October, 1831—writing to Edwin Moxon, he said. "Did G[eorge] D[yer] send his penny tract to me to convert me to Unitarianism? Dear, blunder-

ing soul! why I am as old a one-Goddite as himself." This letter, of course, tends somewhat to confuse the situation since Dyer was an intimate friend of Lamb and also a friend of Doctor Priestley, and must have been acquainted with the religious opinions of the former.

Lamb certainly was never at any time a rigid sectarian. "Being, as you know," he wrote to Southey, in August, 1825, "not quite a Churchman, I felt a jealousy at the Church taking to herself the whole deserts of Christianity, Catholic and Protestant, from Druid-extirpation downwards. I call all good Christians The Church, Capillarians and all. . . . May all our Churches flourish!" Undoubtedly at one time he entertained serious thoughts of becoming a Quaker and read with enjoyment William Penn's, "No Cross, No Crown." He was prevented from taking this step by attending one of their meetings and witnessing the bodily contortions which, in those days, formed a feature of the Quaker assemblings. "I detest," he wrote, "the vanity of a man thinking he speaks by the Spirit, when what he says an ordinary man might say without all that quaking and trembling." But he loved Quakerism in the books of Penn and Woolman, and he wrote to Bernard Barton, a Quaker, in December, 1828:

Thank you for your kind Sonnet. It does me good to see the Dedication to a Christian bishop. I am for a Comprehension, as Divines call it, but so as that the Church shall go a good deal more than half way over to the Silent Meeting-house. I have ever said that the Quakers are the only *Professors* of Christianity as I read it in the Evangiles. I say *Professors;* marry, as to practice, with their gaudy hot types and poetical vanities, they are at one with the sinful.

Lamb detested tittle-tattle and slander. On one occasion, condemning the "orthodox" habit of propagating false rumors, he wrote: "O Southey, Southey, how long would it be before you would find one of us Unitarians propagating such unwarrantable scandal."

Lamb's religious opinions were certainly of the straight-cut type and he viewed almost with consternation Coleridge's leanings towards mysticism and German philosophy. In October, 1796, he wrote to him—whom only a few months previously he had regarded almost as his religious instructor:

In your first fine consolatory epistle you say "you are a temporary sharer in human misery, that you may be an eternal partaker of the Divine Nature." What more than this do those men say who are for exalting the man Christ Jesus into the second person of an unknown Trinity?—men whom you or I scruple not to call idolaters. Man, full of imperfections at best, and subject to wants which

momentarily remind him of dependence; man, a weak and ignorant being, "servile" from his birth "to all the skiey influences," with eyes sometimes open to discern the right path, but a head generally too busy to pursue it; man, in the pride of speculation, forgetting his nature and hailing in himself the future God, must make the angels laugh. Be not angry with me, Coleridge: I wish not to cavil. I know I cannot instruct you: I only wish to remind you of that humility which best becometh the Christian character. God, in the New Testament (our best guide) is represented to us in the kind, condescending, amiable, familiar light of a parent; and in my poor mind 'tis best for us so to consider of him, as our heavenly father, and our best friend, without indulging too bold conceptions of his nature.

Coleridge evidently replied promptly to this letter for four days afterwards we find Lamb writing again to him, evidently in answer to a further letter:

I am not ignorant that to be "a partaker of the divine nature" is a phrase to be met with in Scripture: I am only apprehensive, lest in these latter days, tinctured (some of us perhaps pretty deeply) with mystical notions and the pride of metaphysics, might be able to affix to such phrases a meaning which the primitive users of them, the simple fishermen of Galilee, for instance, never intended to convey. With that other part of your apology, I am not quite so well satisfied. You seem to me to have been straining your comparing faculties to bring together things infinitely distant and unlike—the feeble narrow-sphered operations of the human intellect and the everywhere diffused mind of Deity, the peerless wisdom of Jehovah. Even the expression appears to me inaccurate—"portion of Omnipresence." Omnipresence is an attribute, the very essence of which is unlimitedness. How can Omnipresence be affirmed of anything in part? But enough of this spirit of disputatiousness. Let us attend to the proper business of human life, and talk a little respecting our human concerns.

But, after all, are not opinions of minor importance when compared with acts and deeds? If Professor Jacks will condone the theft of the phrase, Lamb possessed in the highest degree an actable religion. Lamb's religion, says Benjamin Willis Martin, was "like that of most Unbelievers; too large to be labelled by a set of dogmas, too spacious to be packed within church or cathedral walls." The central fact of his life was devotion to duty, combined with a passionate desire for service to others. Once, in a spirit of banter, he wrote: "I shall go and inquire of the stone-cutter that cuts the tombstones here what a stone with a short inscription will cost: just to say: 'Here C. Lamb loved his brethren of mankind.' Everybody will come there to love." That, indeed, was the religion of Charles Lamb. Thus writes B. W. Procter (Barry Cornwall):

The fact that distinguished Charles Lamb from other men was his entire devotion to one grand and tender purpose. There is, probably a romance involved in every life. In his life it exceeded that of others. In gravity, in acuteness, in his noble battle with a great calamity, it was beyond the rest. Neither pleasure nor toil ever distracted him from his holy purpose. Everything was made subservient to it. He had an insane sister, who, in a moment of uncontrollable madness, had unconsciously destroyed her own mother; and to protect and save this sister—a gentle woman, who had watched like a mother over his own infancy—the whole length of his life was devoted. What he endured through the space of nearly forty years, from the incessant fear and frequent recurrence of his sister's insanity, can now only be conjectured. In this constant and uncomplaining endurance, and in his steady adherence to a great principle of conduct, his life was heroic.

We read of men giving up all their days to a single object: to religion, to vengeance, to some overpowering selfish wish; of daring acts done to avert death or disgrace, or some oppressing misfortune. We read mythical tales of friendship, but we do not recollect any instance in which a great object has been so unremittingly carried out throughout a whole life, in defiance of a thousand difficulties, and of numberless temptations, straining the good resolution to its utmost, except in the case of our poor clerk of the India House.

The conduct of Charles Lamb was in striking contrast with that of his only brother, John, for whom he was always finding excuses. Abrupt almost to the point of rudeness, unprepossessing in manner, and deficient in courtesy, he seems to have made no friends, and even Charles was moved to write on one occasion, referring to his mother: "She would always love my brother above Mary, although he was not worth one-tenth of the affection which Mary had the right to claim." John wished to confine his sister in Bethlem Hospital, but Charles secured her release from the asylum in which she had been placed, by entering into a solemn undertaking to take care of her for all time. But there was also thrust upon him, at the age of twenty-two, owing to the possession of a lofty sense of duty, not only the lifelong care of a sister subject to frequent attacks of homicidal madness, but that of an imbecile father and an aunt who had become enfeebled as the result of the domestic tragedy which had deprived the brother and sister of their mother. For his sister's sake he abandoned all thoughts of love and marriage—even an annual holiday had eventually to be abandoned for he thought there was something of dishonesty in any pleasures he took without her. Can the annals of literature, of science, of art, even of religion, produce a like record? The momentary sacrifices and acts of martyr-

dom contained in the annals of religious history fade into insignificance when placed alongside a life's devotion such as this.

Lamb's calmness in the midst of disappointments and misfortune rivalled that of the ancient Job or the modern Moslem. He remained unmoved when the Edinburgh reviewers, then recently launched on their slashing career and reckless in the enjoyment of their power, made elaborate merriment of *John Woodvil*, as he also did at the tremendously hostile reception of his own play, *Mr. H.*, and of Godwin's tragedy, *Antonio, or the Soldier's Return*, for which he had supplied the epilogue. It was something greater than philosophy that sustained him, and many incidents in his life remind one of the verse in Samuel Johnson's hymn:

In the heart's depths a peace serene and holy
Abides; and when pain seems to have her will
Or we despair, O may that peace rise slowly,
Stronger than agony, and we be still.

There seems to have been only one solitary cry of anguish, during his long years of anxiety and suffering, when, in May, 1800, he wrote: "My heart is quite sick, and I don't know where to look for relief. My head is very bad. I almost wish that Mary were dead." At all other times he bowed his head in silence, uncomplaining.

Although he never asked for or received charity or was known even to borrow, he was always ready to lend or to give to any of his importunate or less fortunate acquaintances and would unhesitatingly press his gifts upon them if he thought they were in need, and yet he could write: "Heaven does not owe me sixpence for all I have given or lent (as they call it) to such importunity; I only gave it because I could not bear to refuse it"; but, he added: "I have done no good by my weakness."

Evidently he found spiritual sustenance in the study of the Scriptures, for, although he never talked much about his religion, he wrote once to Bernard Barton: "I can read the homely old version of the Psalms in our prayer books for an hour or two without weariness," while his reverence for Jesus is well depicted in the oft-repeated story of Hazlitt. When there was, on one occasion, a conversation on persons one would wish to have seen, Lamb waited till all others had spoken and then stammered out: "There is one man more. If Shakespeare came into the room we would all rise to meet him. But if That Person should come into it, we would all fall down and kiss the hem of His garment." Truly did he act up to the line he wrote in his Sonnet on "The Family Name":

No deed of mine shall shame thee, gentle name.