



Uncle Chris is

**down, but  
not out**



People were choosy in the early 'twenties. If a product wasn't up to scratch, people just wouldn't buy it. There were plenty of salesmen willing to rush to their doors with goods which did possess advanced features. At the time I was a vacuum-cleaner salesman—selling door-to-door. For a couple of years I had done well. The cleaner was good, and hard experience had taught me the art of selling to housewives. Then sales dropped off. My utmost efforts didn't stop the rot; I covered the same area in half the usual time, visited more houses, talked twice as hard—but no luck. Sales just kept on dropping and I became discouraged. I was down, but not out, because suddenly I saw what was happening. Another firm had brought out a new cleaner, much improved on mine. Naturally housewives—the shrewdest of all women—bought the new product because it was better, and no dearer. My firm took immediate steps to improve their model but, of course, this took time. Meanwhile it was hard luck for me but best in the long run for everyone. Why? Well, people always want something better. They want new designs, new labour-saving devices, competitive prices, goods that look better and do a better job. Under Free Enterprise they get them because manufacturers must go one better than their competitors to get sales.

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## "A Tiresome Old Buffoon"

IT is always interesting to notice the strong feelings that can be aroused by dead writers. Charles Lamb died in 1834, but he still seemed to be very much alive a few weeks ago when Mr. Anton Vogt spoke of him in a ZB Book Review session as "a tiresome old buffoon." A correspondent who takes up the matter on the opposite page, a little tartly, is not the first to feel as if an attack on a favourite author were a personal affront. It may be shown, if the subject is taken further, that Mr. Vogt's incidental comment was not intended to be as sweeping as it sounded. But with Lamb, more than most writers, there is little room for a middle position. He is liked or disliked, and the verdict has few reservations.

Lamb was one of the kindest of men; even Hazlitt, who had a genius for quarrelling, could never quite destroy his friendship. Yet he has been severely treated. Carlyle wrote of him, after a first meeting, with scorn and contempt; and many years later, when he knew the truth about Lamb's tragic life with his sister Mary, he could still be merciless. There is, of course, the other side of the picture. People who came gladly to the Lambs on Wednesday evenings included some of the best intellects of the day; they would not have found the circle congenial if it had been presided over by a fool. Among Lamb's friends were Keats, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Hazlitt, de Quincey and Henry Crabb Robinson, that shrewd judge of men and books. Haydon's description of "the immortal dinner" of December 28, 1817, leaves no doubt that Lamb could be a delightful companion. If it is true that he drank too much—though not as much as his detractors have alleged, it is true also that he suffered greatly; and he did not fail his sister when the clouds rolled back upon her tormented mind. It would have been very strange if sometimes there was not a sound of wildness—even of what Carlyle called "delirium"—

in the laughter of one who lived so much with madness. But there is little truth in the notion that he was a weakling, deserving only pity. "Charles Lamb," wrote Augustine Birrell, "earned his own living, paid his own way, was the helper, not the helped; a man who was beholden to no one, who always came with gifts in his hand, a shrewd man, capable of advice, strong in council."

Critics may dismiss Lamb as an essayist. His blend of sentiment and whimsy is not to everyone's taste, though it is hard to believe that anybody could resist Sarah Battle. But there can be few writers upon whom it is so difficult to pass a merely literary judgment. The essays cannot be separated from the man; they are full of autobiography, and full also of the author's personality. He is so much in his work (outside the *Tales From Shakespeare*, which were only partly his own) that the whole man gains our loyalty, or provokes antipathy. His relationship with readers is personal; and a writer of that sort is most vulnerable to criticism. If we dislike a novelist, it is because we feel no interest in his themes or characters: the man himself is harder to reach. It would not be easy to discover Anthony Trollope behind his novels. Although we know the story of his life, our feelings are engaged much more with Mrs. Proudie, Lily Dale, the Grantleys and other people of Barchester than with the public servant who industriously wrote, hunted and travelled. If readers feel themselves growing warm in defence of a writer, it is partly because they seem to know him as a person. In an intimate way he represents their own interests and beliefs. His ideas are congenial to them, and have influenced their thinking. Or his life has drawn from them a sympathy which is linked also to what they feel and remember of their own hurts and struggles. It is not only Elia who is attacked, but all that he stands for in patience, warm-hearted friendship, and the humour distilled from suffering.

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