

An Unpublished Letter of

CHARLES LAMB.

To C. CHAMBERS

Sept. 1, 1817.*

[It is probable that many attentive and earnest admirers of ELIA, if they were to be told that that admirable man and writer was entitled to a place among those who may be considered the modern disciples of Apicius, would ask a little time to consider and refer, before they agreed with such a proposition. In his earlier and poorer days, Lamb, so far as we can make out, had few opportunities of indulging in the pleasures of the table and the palate. But as his means improved, and his circle of friends widened, we easily discover evidences of his appreciation of certain delicacies, which in some cases showed his taste for such matters to be as idiosyncratic as his views about books. Almost the very latest of his essays was a contribution to the *Athenæum* called "Thoughts on Presents of Game," and as early as 1810 he exhibits an entertaining gusto on the subject of a pig, which had been sent up to him as a present by the Hazlitts from Winterslow. The series of notes to Keefe deals considerably with acknowledgments of oblations of game and "shining" birds; and scattered through the friendly correspondence are numerous hints that Lamb was by no means indifferent to toothsome dishes and flavorful *bonnes bouches*. The hitherto unprinted letter, which I give below, is addressed, as may be perceived, to "Mr. C. Chambers," of Leamington, and is a masterpiece of descriptive humour and opulent fancy. Canon Ainger has inserted in his edition of the "Letters" an expurgated text of a long letter to "Mr. John Chambers," whom he introduces as a colleague of Lamb in Leadenhall-street. That these were two different persons appears tolerably evident, for the present communication is not only endorsed as I have stated, but bears upon its face the testimony that the Christian name of the recipient commenced with the same initial as the writer's. They were possibly relations. The letter given by Canon Ainger was undoubtedly sent to "John" Chambers, for I have taken the pains to verify that point. This is, however, a critical question, which may be reserved for another place and occasion.—W. CAREW HAZLITT.]



WITH regard to a John Dory, which you desire to be particularly informed about—I honour the fish, but it is rather on account of Quin who patronized it, and whose taste (of a *dead man*) I had as lieve go by as any body's (Apicius and Heliogabalus excepted—this latter started nightingales' tongues and peacocks' brains as a garnish).

Else in *itself*, and trusting to my own poor single judgment, it hath not that moist mellow oleaginous gliding smooth descent from the tongue to the palate, thence to the stomach, &c., that your Brighton Turbot hath, which I take to be the most friendly and familiar flavor of any that swims—most genial and at home to the palate—

Nor has it on the other hand that fine falling off flakiness, that oleaginous peeling off (as it were, like a sea onion), which endears your cod's head & shoulders to some appetites, that manly firmness, combined with a sort of womanish coming-in-pieces, which the same cod's head & shoulders hath, where the whole is easily separable, pliant to a knife or a spoon, but each individual flake presents a pleasing resistance to the opposed tooth—you understand me—these delicate subjects are necessarily obscure.

But it has a third flavor of its own, perfectly distinct from Cod or Turbot, which it must be owned may to some not injudicious palates render it acceptable—but to my unpractised tooth it presented rather a crude river-fish-flavor, like your Pike or Carp, and perhaps like them should have been tamed & corrected by some laborious &

* This date is not in Lamb's hand; probably it was supplied by the recipient.

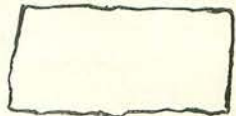
well chosen sauce. Still I always suspect a fish which requires so much of artificial settings - off. Your choicest relishes (like nature's loveliness) need not the foreign aid of ornament, but are when unadorned (that is, with nothing but a little plain anchovy & a squeeze of lemon) are then adorned the most. However, I shall go to Brighton again next Summer, and shall have an opportunity of correcting my judgment, if it is not sufficiently informed. I can only say that when Nature was pleased to make the John Dory so notoriously deficient in outward graces (as to be sure he is the very Rhinoceros of fishes, the ugliest dog that swims, except perhaps the Sea Satyr, which I never saw, but which they say is terrible), when she formed him with so few external advantages, she might have bestowed a more elaborate finish in his parts internal, & have given him a relish, a sapor, to recommend him, as she made Pope a Poet to make up for making him crooked.

I am sorry to find that you have got a knack of saying things which are not true to shew your wit. If I had no wit but what I must shew at the expence of my virtue or my modesty, I had as lieve be as stupid as * * * at ¹ the Tea Warehouse. Depend upon it, my dear Chambers, that an ounce of integrity at our death-bed will stand us in more avail than all the wit of Congreve or * * * * For instance, you tell me a fine story about Truss, and his playing at Leamington, which I know to be false, because I have advice from Derby that he was whipt through the Town on that very day you say he appeared in some character or other, for robbing an old woman at church of a seal ring. And Dr. Parr has been two months dead. So it won't do to scatter these untrue stories about among people that know any thing. Besides, your forte is not invention. It is *judgment*, particularly shown in your choice of dishes. We seem in that instance born under one star. I like you for liking hare.

¹ So in the original. Query Rye, one of Lamb's colleagues.



I esteem you for disrelishing minced veal. Liking is too cold a word. I love you for your noble attachment to the fat unctuous juices of deer's flesh & the green unspeakable of turtle. I honour you for your endeavours to esteem and approve of my favorite, which I ventured to recommend to you as a substitute for hare, bullock's heart, and I am not offended that you cannot taste it with *my* palate. A true son of Epicurus should reserve one taste peculiar to himself. For a long time I kept the secret about the exceeding deliciousness of the marrow of boiled knuckle of veal, till my tongue weakly ran riot in its praises, and now it is prostitute & common.—But I have made one discovery which I will not impart till my dying scene is over, perhaps it will be my last mouthful in this world, delicious thought, enough to sweeten (or rather make savoury) the hour of death. It is a little square bit about this size in or



near the huckle bone of a fried joint of * *
 * * * * fat I can't call it nor lean neither
 altogether, it is that beautiful compound,
 which Nature must have made in Paradise
 Park venison, before she separated the
 two substances, the dry & the oleaginous,
 to punish sinful mankind ; Adam ate them
 entire & inseparate, and this little taste
 of Eden in the huckle bone of a fried
 * * * * seems the only relique of a Para-
 disaical state. When I die, an exact de-

scription of its topography shall be left
 in a cupboard with a key, inscribed on
 which these words, "C. Lamb dying
 imparts this to C. Chambers as the only
 worthy depository of such a secret." You'll
 drop a tear. * * * * *

[Endorsed:]

Mr. C. Chambers,
 Leamington,
 near
 Warwick.

