

HOW TO STUDY "THE ESSAYS OF ELIA."

Prose selections are recognized as the hardest of all lessons in English. It is difficult to give the variety that is easily got in poetry, and the appeal to the ear is not so strong. There is great temptation to dwell upon questions of language, upon derivation, distinctions of meaning, and grammar. It is not easy to find out how to interest the young student. But interest is the first essential, whether we are thinking of the ultimate and really important aim in teaching literature, namely, to lead the student to enjoy good books; or of the more immediate and pressing one, which is to prepare him for examinations.

To what point in the Essays of Elia are we to direct the pupil's attention? Compare them with other Essays. What do we get from them? Macaulay's Essays give us historical and literary information. Addison and Steel wrote with the aim of reforming manners and customs, and give us lively pictures of the life of the time. But Charles Lamb offers us neither improving information nor instruction. His Essays read as if he wrote them for his own amusement, for the pleasure of expressing his likes and dislikes, his opinions, fancies and dreams. They reveal to us one of the most charming and lovable men that ever lived. And if we do not gain this impression from reading them, we have missed all that they mean.

Collect the essays that are professedly autobiographical, and see if you cannot sketch his life from "The Old Benchers," "Christ's Hospital," "The South Sea House," and the others. What do you learn from these of his birth and education, position in life, family, friends, occupations? What important event in his life is never touched upon? Go on from the outward accidents and events of life to the character and disposition of the man. You will find passages of self-revelation in nearly all the essays. Look for them in "A Chapter on Ears," "Witches and other Night-fears," "New Year's Eve." Do not neglect "Old China." What do you learn from these of his tastes; his preferences among men, books, surroundings; his affections; religious belief; his amusements? What contemporary writers were his friends? From what poets does he quote? Make one essay throw light on another. Study the description of himself in the Preface to the "Last Essays." With the

description of his sister, under the guise of a cousin, in "Mackery End," compare the account of their life in "Old China." Some passages in "Detached Thoughts on Books and Reading" should also be read with this essay.

Notice that while he is constantly revealing himself, and is never afraid of the pronoun "I," and while he himself is more interesting than anything else that he writes about, he is as far as possible from being self-centred. Life is full of interest to him. "Glad did I live," is as true of him as of the writer of those words, and that gladness made his life, with its awful tragedy, not resigned, but gallant. In "New Year's Eve," he tells us some of the things in which he found pleasure—and in "Dream Children," of those blessings which were not for him, except in dreams.

Study his descriptions of persons and places. How does he convey them? By a complete, closely woven picture, or by a succession of scattered touches? In what kind of person did he find most interest? With what feelings did he study and describe them?

Mr. Ernest Rhys, in an introduction to the "Essays" in the Canelot Series, has this pregnant saying. "There is more in 'Elia' than a fine set of literary exercises, as the Essays seem to be too often regarded. One finds in them, indeed, the *perfect expression of Lamb's whole feeling about life.*"

It is no light thing for young people to have their outlook upon life influenced by one who saw it as "the gentle Elia" did, with such courage, such imagination, and such sympathy.

(To be continued).

THE SINGING WIRES.—Most of us have wondered at the curious "singing" of the telegraph and telephone-wires often heard along quiet country roads. Professor Field of the University of Ottawa suggests that the noises are due to vibrations transmitted to the wires by the posts, which receive them from the earth, and that they are the results of earth vibrations identical with those that the seismograph, or earthquake-detector, records. "The sound of the wires," Professor Field adds, "is the song of the barometer; if it is low, a change in the weather may come in two days; if sharp, it may be immediate."—*Youth's Companion*.