

Rejoicings Upon the New Year's Coming of Age (an extract from *The Last Essays of Elia* 1833)

By Charles Lamb



This piece is taken from 'The Last Essays of Elia' by Charles Lamb. A Contemporary of Lamb was the playwright William Hazlitt who is attributed with the comment on Lamb as "the most delightful, the most provoking, the most witty and sensible of men." As the year draws to a close, we wish you good reading with this light-hearted composition on the celebration of the passing of time, which itself retains a time-less quality.

Rejoicings upon the New Year's Coming of Age

The *Old Year* being dead, and the *New Year* coming of age, which he does, by Calendar Law, as soon as the breath is out of the old gentleman's body, nothing would serve the young spark but he must give a dinner upon the occasion, to which all the *Days* in the year were invited. The *Festivals*, whom he deputed as his stewards, were mightily taken with the notion. They had been engaged time out of mind, they said, in providing mirth and good cheer for mortals below, and it was time they should have a taste of their own bounty. It was stiffly debated among them whether the *Fasts* should be admitted. Some said the appearance of such lean, starved guests, with their mortified faces, would pervert the ends of the meeting. But, the objection was overruled by *Christmas Day*, who had a design upon *Ash Wednesday* (as you shall hear), and a mighty desire to see how the old Dominie would behave himself in his cups. Only the *Vigils* were requested to come with their lanterns, to light the gentlefolks home at night.

All the *Days* came to their day. Covers were provided for three hundred and sixty-five guests at he principal table; with an occasional knife and fork at the side-board for the *Twenty-Ninth of February*.

I should have told you that cards of invitation had been issued. The carriers were the *Hours*; twelve little, merry whirligig foot-pages, as you should desire to see, that went all round, and found out the persons invited well enough, with the exception of *Easter Day*,

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Wedding Day was there in his marriage finery, a little the worse for wear. *Pay Day* came late, as he always does; and *Doomesday* sent word – he might be expected.



Shrove Tuesday, and a few such *Moveables*, who had lately shifted their quarters.

Well, they all met at last, foul *Days*, fine *Days*, all sort of *Days*, and a rear din they made of it. There was nothing by, Hail! fellow *Day*, - well met – brother *Day* – sister *Day* – only *Lady Day* kept a little on the aloof, and seemed somewhat scornful. Yet some said, *Twelfth Day* cut her out and out, for she came in a tiffany suit, white and gold, like a queen on a frost-cake, all royal and glittering, and *Epiphanous*. The rest came, some in green, some in white – but old *Lent and his family* were not yet out of mourning. Rainy *Days* cam in, dripping; and sunshiny *Days* helped them to change their stockings. *Wedding Day* was there in his marriage finery, a little the worse for wear. *Pay Day* came late, as he always does; and *Doomesday* sent word – he might be expected.

April Fool (as my young lord's jester) took upon himself to marshal the guests, and wild work he made with it. It would have posed old Erra Pater to have found out any given *Day* in the year, to erect a scheme upon – good *Days*, bad *Days*, were so shuffled together, to the confounding of all sober horoscopy.

He had stuck the *Twenty-First of June* next to the *Twenty-Second of December*, and the former looked like a Maypole siding a marrow-bone. *Ash Wednesday* got wedged in (as was concerted) betwixt *Christmas* and *Lord Mayor's Days*. Lord! How he laid about him! Nothing but barons of beef and turkeys would go down with him – to the great greasing and detriment of his new sackcloth bib and tucker. And still *Christmas Day* was at his elbow, plying him with the wassail bowl, till he roared, and hiccup'd and protested there was no faith in dried ling, but commended it to the devil for a sour, windy, acrimonious, censorious, hy-po-crit-crit-critical mess, and no dish for a gentleman. Then he dipt his fist into the middle of the great custard that stood before his *left hand neighbour*, and daubed his hungry beard all over with it, till you would have taken him for the *Last Day in December*, it so hung in icicles.

At another part of the table, *Shrove Tuesday* was helping the *Second of September* to some cock broth, - which courtesy of the latter returned with the delicate thigh of a hen pheasant – so there was no love lost for that matter. The *Last of Lent* was sponging upon *Shrovetide's* pancakes; which *April Fool* perceiving, told him he did well, for pancakes were proper to a good fry-day.

In another part, a hubbub arose about the *Thirtieth of January*, who, it seems, being a sour puritanic character, that though nobody's meat good or sanctified enough for him, had smuggled into the room a calf's head, which he had had cooked at home for that purpose, thinking to feast thereon incontinently; but as it lay in the dish, *March Manyweathers*, who is a very fine lady, and subject to the meagrim, screamed out there was a 'human head in the platter.' And raved about Herodias' daughter to that degree, that the obnoxious viand was obliged to be removed; nor did she recover her stomach till she had gulped down a *Restorative*, confected of *Oak Apple*, which the merry *Twenty-Ninth of May* always carries about with him for that purpose.

The king's health being called for after this, a notable dispute arose between the *Twelfth of August* (a zealous old Whig gentlewoman) and the *Twenty-Third of April* (a new-fangled lady of the Tory stamp), as to which of them should have the honour to propose it. *August* grew hot upon the matter, affirming time out of mind the prescriptive right to have lain with her, till her rival had basely supplanted her; whom she represented as little better than a kept mistress, who went about in fine clothes, while she (the legitimate BIRTHDAY) had scarcely a rag, &c.

April Fool, being made mediator, confirmed the right, in the strongest form of words, to the appellant, but decided for peace' sake that the exercise of it should remain with the present possessor. At the same time, he slyly rounded the first lady in the ear, that an action might lie against the Crown for *by-geny*.

It beginning to grow a little dusk-ish, *Candlemas* lustily bawled out for lights, which



was opposed by all the *Days*, who protested against burning daylight. Then fair water was handed round in silver ewers, and the *same lady* was observed to take an unusual time in *Washing* herself.

May Day, with that sweetness which is peculiar to her, in a neat speech proposing the health of the founder, crowned her goblet (and by her example the rest of the company) with garlands. This being done, the lordly *New Year*, from the upper end of the table, in a cordial but somewhat lofty tone, returned thanks. He felt proud on an occasion of meeting so many of his worthy father's late tenants, promised to improve their farms, and at the same time to abate (if anything was found unreasonable) in their rents.

At the mention of this, the four *Quarter Days* involuntarily looked at each other, and smiled; *April Fool* whistled to an old tune of 'New Brooms;' and a surly old rebel at the further end of the table (who was discovered to be no other than the *Fifth of November*) muttered out, distinctly enough to be heard by the whole company, words to this effect, that 'when the old one is gone, he is a fool that looks for a better.' Which rudeness of his, the guests resenting, unanimously voted his expulsion; and the malecontent was thrust out neck and heels into the cellar, as the properest place for such a bouitefeu and firebrand as he had shown himself to be.

Order being restored – the young lord (who, to say truth, had been a little ruffled, and put beside his oratory) in as few, and yet as obliging words as possible, assured them of entire welcome; and, with a graceful turn, singling out poor *Twenty-Ninth of February*, that had sate all this while mumchance at the side-board, begged to couple his health with that of the good company before him – which he drank accordingly; observing that he had not seen his honest face any time these four years – with a number of endearing expressions besides. At the same time, removing the solitary *Day* from the forlorn seat which had been assigned him, he stationed him at his own board, somewhere between the *Greek Calends* and *Latter Lammas*.

Ash Wednesday, being now called upon for a song, with his eyes fast stuck in his head, and as well as the Canary he had swallowed would given him leave, struck up a Carol, which *Christmas Day* had taught him for the nonce; and was followed by the latter, who gave 'Miserere,' in fine style, hitting off the mumping notes and lengthened drawl of *Old Mortification* with infinite humour. *April Fool* swore they had exchanged conditions, but *Good Friday* was observed to look extremely grave; and *Sunday* held her fan before her face that she might not be seen to smile.

Shrovetide, *Lord Mayor's Day*, and *April Fool*, next joined in a glee –

Which is the properest day to drink?

In which all the *Days* chiming in, made a merry burden.

They next fell to quibbles and conundrums. The question being proposed, who had the greatest number of followers – the *Quarter Days* said, there could be no question as to that; for they had all the creditors in the world dogging in their heels. But *April Fool* gave it in favour of the *Forty Days before Easter*, because the debtors in all cases out-numbered the creditors, and they kept lent all year.

All this while *Valentine's Day* kept courting pretty *May*, who sate next to him, slipping amorous billets-doux under the table, till *Dog Days* (who are naturally of a warm constitution) began to be jealous, and to bark and rage exceedingly. *April Fool*, who likes a bit of sport above measure, and had some pretensions to the lady besides, as being but a cousin once removed, - clapped and halloo'd them on; and as fast as their indignation cooled, the mad wags, the *Ember Days*, were at it with their bellows, to blow in into a flame; and all was in a ferment; till old Madam *Septuagesima* (who boasts herself the *Mother of the Days*) wisely diverted the conversation with a

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tedious tale of the lovers which she could reckon when she was young; and of one Master *Rogation Day* in particular, who was for ever putting the *question* to her; but she kept him at a distance, as the chronicle would tell – by which I apprehend she meant the Almanack. Then she rambled on to the *Days that were done*, the *good old Days*, and so to the *Days before the Flood* – which plainly showed her old head to be little better than crazed and doited.

Day being ended, the *Days* called for their cloaks and great-coats, and took their leaves. *Lord Mayor's Day* went off in a Mist, as usual; *Shortest Day* in a deep black Fog, that wrapt the little gentleman all round like a hedgehog. Two *Vigils* – so watchmen are called in heaven – saw *Christmas Day* safe home – they had been used to the business before. Another *Vigil* – a stout, sturdy, patrol, called the *Eve of St. Christopher* – see *Ash Wednesday* in a condition little better than he should be – e'en whipt



him over his shoulders, pick-a-back fashion, and *Old Mortification* went floating home singing –

On the bat's back do I fly

And a number of old snatches besides, between drunk and sober; but very few *Aves* or *Penitentiaries* (you may believe me) were among them. *Longest Day* set off westward in beautiful crimson and gold; but *Valentine* and pretty *May* took their departure together in one of the prettiest silvery twilight's a *Lover's Day* could wish to set in ☐

Place Settings -
all the right
ingredients.

Author's bio

Foreword by
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Main text: Charles
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English essayist
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Other works
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Elia* (1823), and *On
the tragedies of
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Images: iStock

Contributions from guest writers are welcome

Well-written, original pieces of 400-2500 words will be considered. No recipes or guide book material that is not part of a narrative travel piece, please.

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