

# Charles Lamb eBook

## Charles Lamb by Bryan Procter

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# Page 1

## THE STORY OF HIS LIFE

Charles Lamb's biography should be read at length in his essays and his letters—from them we get to know not only the facts of his life but almost insensibly we get a knowledge of the man himself such as cannot be conveyed in any brief summary. He is as a friend, a loved friend, whom it seems almost sacrilegious to summarize in the compact sentences of a biographical dictionary, of whom it would be a wrong to write if the writing were to be used instead of, rather than as an introduction to, a literary self-portrait, more striking it may be believed than any of the canvases in the Uffizi Gallery. When he was six-and-twenty Charles Lamb wrote thus in reply to an invitation from Wordsworth to visit him in Cumberland:

I have passed all my days in London ... the lighted shops of the Strand and Fleet Street; the innumerable trades, tradesmen and customers, coaches, waggons, playhouses; all the bustle and wickedness round about Covent Garden; the very women of the town; the watchmen, drunken scenes, rattles; life awake, if you awake, at all hours of the night; the impossibility of being dull in Fleet Street; the crowds, the very dirt and mud, the sun shining upon houses and pavements, the print shops, the old bookstalls, parsons cheapening books, coffee houses, steams of soups from kitchens, the pantomimes—London itself a pantomime and a masquerade—all these things work themselves into my mind, and feed me, without a power of satiating me. The wonder of these sights impels me into night walks about her crowded streets, and I often shed tears in the motley Strand from fulness of joy at so much life. All these emotions must be strange to you; so are your rural emotions to me. But consider, what must I have been doing all my life, not to have lent great portions of my heart with usury to such scenes?

In whimsical exaggeration Lamb sometimes wrote of his aversion from country sights and sounds, adopting that method partly perhaps for the purpose of rallying his correspondents, and partly for the purpose of accentuating his own "unrural notions." He was a Londoner of Londoners. In London he was born and educated, and in London—with a few of his later years in what is now but an outer suburb—he passed the fifty-nine years of his life. Beyond some childish holidays in pleasant Hertfordshire, a few brief trips into the country—to Coleridge at Stowey and at Keswick, to Oxford and Cambridge, and one short journey to Paris—he had no personal contact with the outer world. He delighted in his devotion to London, and stands pre-eminent as the Londoner in literature.



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Charles Lamb was the son of John Lamb, who had left his native Lincolnshire—probably from the neighbourhood of Stamford—as a child, and who finally found himself attached to one Samuel Salt, a Bencher of the Inner Temple, in the capacity of “his clerk, his good servant, his dresser, his friend, his ‘flapper,’ his guide, stop-watch, auditor, treasurer.” Salt’s chambers were at 2, Crown Office Row, and there John Lamb lived with a family consisting of himself, his wife, an unmarried sister, Sarah Lamb (“Aunt Hetty”), a son John, aged twelve, and a daughter Mary, aged eleven, when on 10th February, 1775, there was born to him another son to whom was given the now familiar name. Seven children had been born from 1762 to 1775, but of them all these three alone survived. The father and his employer are sketched, unforgetably, in Lamb’s essay on “The Old Benchers of the Inner Temple,” Salt, under his own name, and Lamb under that of Lovel: “I knew this Lovel. He was a man of an incorrigible and losing honesty. A good fellow withal and ‘would strike.’ In the cause of the oppressed he never considered inequalities, or calculated the number of his opponents.” The whole passage must be read in the essay itself. From his father Charles Lamb inherited at once his literary leanings and his humour, both heightened to an incalculable degree. We have Elia’s word for it that John Lamb the elder “was the liveliest little fellow breathing” with a face as gay as Garrick’s, and we know further that he published a small volume of simple verse. From the father, too, the family derived a heavier inheritance, which was to cast its shadow over their lives from the day of Charles’s early manhood to the day half a century later, when his sister Mary, the last survivor of the family circle, was laid to rest.

Lamb’s mother, Elizabeth Field, is—for obvious reasons—the only member of the immediate family circle whom we do not meet in his writings. His maternal grandmother—the grandame who is to be met in his verses and in some of his essays—was for over half a century housekeeper at Blakesware in Hertfordshire, and with her, as a small boy, Charles spent pleasant holidays.

Little Charles Lamb was sent for a time to “a humble day-school, at which reading and writing were taught to us boys in the morning, and the same slender erudition was communicated to the girls, our sisters, *etc.*, in the evening.” In a letter to Coleridge (5th July, 1796) we have a hint that Lamb may have had yet earlier teaching in an infant school in the Temple for he writes: “Mr. Chambers lived in the Temple; Mrs. Reynolds, his daughter, was my schoolmistress”; though it may be that the lady referred to was employed in Mr. Bird’s school. This school, kept by William Bird “in the passage leading from Fetter Lane into Bartlett’s Buildings,” was the one to which Mary Lamb appears to have owed her regular training; but Samuel Salt had a goodly collection of old books in his chambers,

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and among these the brother and sister browsed most profitably, to use his own expressive word, acquiring an early liking for good literature and learning to take their best recreation in things of the mind. But if from the “school room looking into a discoloured dingy garden” Mary Lamb was presumed to be able to acquire a sufficiency of knowledge, it was seen that her younger brother needed something more than Mr. Bird could give to fit him for a life in which he would have to take an early place as bread-winner. John Lamb’s friendly employer—whom lovers of Lamb can never recall but to honour—secured a nomination for the boy to Christ’s Hospital, and thither in his eighth year the little fellow was transferred from the home in the Temple.

Should a zealous compiler seek to arrange an autobiography of Charles Lamb from his writings he would not have a difficult task, and he would find two delightful essays devoted to the famous school—so long the distinguishing feature of Newgate Street—where “blue-coat boys” passed the most importantly formative period of their lives. Handicapped somewhat by a stuttering speech Charles Lamb did not perhaps join in all the boyish sports of his fellows, though there are many testimonies to the regard in which he was held by his school-mates, and the fact is stressed that though the only one of his surname at Christ’s Hospital, he was never “Lamb” but always “Charles Lamb,” as though there were something of an endearment in the constant use of his Christian name. “The Christ’s Hospital or Blue-coat boy, has a distinctive character of his own, as far removed from the abject qualities of a common charity-boy as it is from the disgusting forwardness of a lad brought up at some other of the public schools.” In the essay from which this is quoted, Charles Lamb, looking back a quarter of a century after leaving the old foundation, summed up the characteristics of his school as reflected in the character of its boys of whom he and the close friend he made there are the two whose names are the most commonly on the lips of men. It is, indeed, worthy of remark that from amid the countless boys educated at Christ’s Hospital since it was founded three centuries and a half ago by “the flower of the Tudor name ... boy patron of boys,” the names that stand out most prominently are those of the two who were at the school together—Charles Lamb and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. It was at that old “Hospital,” recently, alas, demolished, that these men, so different in genius, so similar in many of their intellectual tastes, began a memorable friendship that was only to be broken by death more than half a century later.

A schoolfellow’s description of him may help us to visualize the elusive figure of which we have no early portraits, and the later portraits of which are understood to be wanting in one regard or another. His countenance, says this early observer, was mild; his complexion clear brown, with an expression that might lead you to think that he was of Jewish descent. His eyes were not each of the same colour: one was hazel, the other had specks of grey in the iris, mingled as we see red spots in the bloodstone. His step was plantigrade, which made his walk slow and peculiar, adding to the staid appearance of his figure.



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[Illustration: *Christ's hospital.*]

For seven years—from October 1782 until November 1789—Charles Lamb remained at Christ's Hospital, and then, close upon fifteen years of age, returned to his parents in the Temple. His brother John had obtained an appointment in the South Sea House, probably through the kindly offices of Samuel Salt, who was a Deputy-Governor, and at some unascertained date between 1789 and 1792, Charles found employment in the same office; not, however, for long, for in April of 1792 he was appointed clerk in the accountant's office of the East India House, at a commencing salary of L70 per annum. This same year which thus saw the founding of Charles Lamb's humble fortunes, saw also the beginning of the break-up of his home, for the immortal old Bencher, Samuel Salt, died, and the Lamb family was left without its mainstay. John Lamb the elder was past work, already, we may believe, passing into senility; and John Lamb the younger, who appears to have been prospering in the South Sea House, had presumably set up his bachelor home elsewhere. Salt bequeathed to his clerk and factotum a pension of L10 a year, and various legacies amounting to about L700. The old home in the Temple had to be given up, but whither the family first removed is not known. Four years later they were living in Little Queen Street—now a portion of Kingsway—off Holborn, in a house on the west side, the site of which is now covered by a church.

At the end of 1794—though his first known verses are dated five years earlier—Charles Lamb had, so far as we are aware, the pleasure of seeing himself for the first time “in print,” and curiously enough here at the earliest beginning of his life as author he was intimately associated with Coleridge; indeed, his “effusion,” a sonnet addressed to Mrs. Siddons, appeared in “The Morning Chronicle” on 29th December, with the signature “S. T. C.” Coleridge, we learn from Lamb's letters, altered the sonnet and was welcome to do so, and the poem properly appears in both of their collected works; the recension is certainly not an improvement on the original. In the spring of 1796 a small volume of Coleridge's poems was published, four sonnets by Lamb being included in it; and in May, 1796, was written the earliest of the rich collection of Lamb's letters which have come down to us. In this letter we have the first mention of the shadow which overhung the Lamb family.

My life has been somewhat diversified of late. The six weeks that finished last year and began this, your very humble servant spent very agreeably in a madhouse at Hoxton. I am got somewhat rational now, and don't bite any one. But mad I was; and many a vagary my imagination played with me, enough to make a volume, if all were told.... Coleridge, it may convince you of my regard for you when I tell you my head ran on you in my madness as much almost as on another person, who I am inclined



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to think was the more immediate cause of my temporary frenzy.

It is assumed that the closing reference here is to Lamb's romantic love for A—— W ——; the "Anna" of some of his sonnets written about this time, the "Alice W——" of the later "Dream Children," and other of the essays, and that it was to the unhappy course of a deep love that Charles Lamb owed his brief period of mental aberration. This year, 1796, which was to close in tragic gloom, was indeed marked almost throughout by unhappiness, lightened only by the close and friendly correspondence with Coleridge. From these letters we learn that besides his own mental trouble, his sister had been very ill, his brother was laid up and demanded constant attention, having a leg so bad that for a time the necessity of amputation appeared to be probable.[1] Through it all Charles Lamb was conscious of being "sore galled with disappointed hope," and felt something of enforced loneliness, consequent upon his being, as he described himself, "slow of speech and reserved of manners"; he went nowhere, as he put it, had no acquaintance, and but one friend—Coleridge. It is difficult, in reading much in these letters, to realize that the writer was but just come of age in the previous February. The first twenty or so of the letters of Lamb which have come down to us are addressed to Coleridge (1796-1798). Between the seventh of the series (5th July, 1796) and the eighth (27th September, 1796) there is a gap of time at the close of which happened the tragedy that coloured the whole of Charles Lamb's subsequent life and caused him to give himself up to a life of devotion to which it would not be easy to find a parallel.

[Footnote 1: It is curious that a quarter of a century later, when writing of his brother in "Dream Children," Lamb speaks of his being lame-footed, and of having his limb actually taken off.]

The story is best told in the poignant simplicity of Lamb's first letter to Coleridge after the calamity:

*My dearest friend,*

White, or some of my friends, or the public papers, by this time may have informed you of the terrible calamities that have fallen on our family. I will only give you the outlines: My poor dear, dearest sister, in a fit of insanity, has been the death of her own mother. I was at hand only time enough to snatch the knife out of her grasp. She is at present in a madhouse, from whence I hear she must be moved to an hospital. God has preserved to me my senses, I eat and drink and sleep, and have my judgment, I believe, very sound. My poor father was slightly wounded, and I am left to take care of him and my aunt. Mr. Norris of the Blue-Coat School, has been very kind to us, and we have no other friends; but, thank God, I am very calm and composed, and able to do the best that remains to do. Write as religious a letter as possible, but no mention of what is gone and done with. With me "the former things are passed away," and I have something more to do than to feel.

God Almighty have us all in His keeping!



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*C. Lamb.*

Mention nothing of poetry, I have destroyed every vestige of past vanities of that kind. Do as you please, but if you publish, publish mine (I give free leave) without name or initial, and never send me a book, I charge you. Your own judgment will convince you not to take any notice of this yet to your dear wife. You look after your family; I have my reason and strength left to take care of mine, I charge you, don't think of coming to see me. Write. I will not see you if you come. God Almighty love you and all of us!

*C. Lamb.*

At the inquest the only possible verdict was returned, that of homicide during temporary insanity, against the young woman who, in her frenzy, had killed her own mother and destroyed a home which she had been working hard, as a mantua maker, to help support. The awful shock had, perhaps, a steadying effect on Charles Lamb. Here he was at the age of one-and-twenty suddenly placed in a position that might have tried a strong-minded man in his prime; his brother, a dozen years his senior, so far as we are aware mixed himself as little as might be with the family tragedy; poor Mary had to be placed in an asylum and supported there, and a pledge taken for her future safe-guarding, while in the home a physically feeble old aunt and a mentally feeble old father had to be looked after and companioned. Humbly and unhesitatingly he who was but little more than a youth in years took up a task which it is painful even to contemplate; the simple spirit in which he did so may be realized from a noble letter which he sent to his friend at the time. The shattered family removed from Little Queen Street to 45, Chapel Street, Pentonville, and there in the following year Aunt Hetty died. In the spring of 1799 old John Lamb also passed away, and Mary returned to share her brother's home, to be tended always with loving solicitude, though ever and again she had to be removed during recurring attacks of her mental malady. In this brief summary of the story of Charles Lamb's life it is not necessary to keep referring to this fact, though it should be borne in mind that from time to time throughout their lives, Mary, affected now by solitariness and now by the over-excitement of seeing many friends, had to be placed under restraint for periods varying from a few weeks to several months. In this spring of 1799, too, with Mary's return to share her brother's life, began a new trouble. They were, as Lamb put it, "in a manner marked," and had frequently to change their lodgings until they were once more domiciled in the sanctuary of the Temple, where they had been born and where they had passed their childhood and youth.

[Illustration: *Christ's hospital: The dining hall.*]



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In the first feeling of his horror after his mother's death, and with a sense of all the responsibility that had fallen upon his shoulders Lamb had disclaimed any further interest in literature, had asked Coleridge not to mention it, not to include his name in a projected volume. Yet he was to find in reading and in writing—and in the friendship of those who cared for reading and writing—at once a solace and a joy in his own life and a passport to the affections of generations of readers. In 1797 there was published a new edition of Coleridge's Poems, "to which are now added Poems by Charles Lamb and Charles Lloyd." In the summer of the same year he spent a week at Nether Stowey with Coleridge,[2] and in the autumn he and Lloyd passed a fortnight with Southey in Hampshire. He was consolidating the friendships which were to bind him ever closer to letters. With Coleridge, as we have seen, he was on terms of intimacy, and when that poet went abroad for a while Southey became Lamb's most intimate correspondent. The keenly sensitive young man later resented being dubbed "gentle-hearted," and an apparent assumption of lofty superiority on the part of his friend, stung him to a memorable retort. We may take the story from one of Lamb's own letters to Southey:

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, to the eternal regret of his native Devonshire, emigrates to Westphalia: "poor Lamb" (these were his last words), if he wants any knowledge, he may apply to me. In ordinary cases I thank him. I have an "Encyclopaedia" at hand; but on such an occasion as going over to a German University, I could not refrain from sending him the following proposition to be by him defended or oppugned (or both) at Leipsic or Gottingen.

[Footnote 2: Coleridge, disabled by some slight accident, was unable to accompany his friends on their walks during this visit of the Lambs, and once when they had left him he wrote the beautiful poem, "This Lime Tree Bower My Prison," which he "addressed to Charles Lamb, of the India House, London." In it that friend was referred to in this passage:

Yes! they wander on  
In gladness all; but thou, methinks, most glad,  
My gentle-hearted Charles! for thou hast pined  
And hungered after Nature, many a year,  
In the great City pent, winning thy way  
With sad yet patient soul, through evil and pain  
And strange calamity!

]

The Theses, as given in the letter to Coleridge, are as follows:

Theses Quaedam Theologicae.

First, Whether God loves a lying angel better than a true man?



Second, Whether the Archangel Uriel could affirm an untruth?  
and if he could, whether he would?

Third, Whether honesty be an angelic virtue, or not rather  
to be reckoned among those qualities which the school men  
term *virtutes minus splendidae*?

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Fourth, Whether the higher order of Seraphim illuminati ever sneer?

Fifth, Whether pure intelligences can love?

Sixth, Whether the Seraphim ardentes do not manifest their virtues by the way of vision and theory; and whether practice be not a sub-celestial and merely human virtue?

Seventh, Whether the vision beatific be anything more or less than a perpetual re-presentment to each individual angel of his own present attainments and future capabilities, somehow in the manner of mortal looking-glasses, reflecting a perpetual complacency and self-satisfaction?

Eighth, and last. Whether an immortal and amenable soul may not come to be condemned at last, and the man never suspect it before hand?

The poet did not reply, and the misunderstanding between the two was happily not long continued. I have sometimes doubted whether Coleridge ever knew Lamb so well as Lamb knew Coleridge, though of his affection for the brother and sister there can be no doubt; of them he wrote at the end of his life:

Dear to my heart, yea as it were my heart.

In his "Sidelights on Charles Lamb," too, Mr. Bertram Dobell rescued a remarkably interesting testimony "minuted down from the lips of Coleridge," which shows that the poet came to know Lamb better than when he sent his provocative message:

Charles Lamb has more totality and individuality of character than any other man I know, or have ever known in all my life. In most men we distinguish between the different powers of their intellect as one being predominant over the other. The genius of Wordsworth is greater than his talent, though considerable. The talent of Southey is greater than his genius, though respectable; and so on. But in Charles Lamb it is altogether one; his genius is talent, and his talent is genius, and his heart is as whole and one as his head. The wild words that come from him sometimes on religious subjects would shock you from the mouth of any other man, but from him they seem mere flashes of fireworks. If an argument seem to his reason not fully true, he bursts out in that odd desecrating way; yet his will, the inward man, is, I well know, profoundly religious. Watch him, when alone, and you will find him with either a Bible or an old divine, or an old English poet; in such is his pleasure.

In 1798 was published "A Tale of Rosamund Gray and Poor Blind Margaret," a story of which Lamb wrote in the following year: "Rosamund sells well in London, malgre the



non-reviewal of it,” and in 1798 also, Lloyd and Lamb published a joint volume of “Blank Verse.”

It was in the spring of 1801—a pleasant beginning of the new century for them—that the Lambs, after having had all too frequently to change their lodgings owing to the “rarity of Christian charity,” which objected to housing a quiet couple because of their affliction, at length found pleasant residence in 16, Mitre Court Buildings. Writing to his friend, Thomas Manning—one of the correspondents with whom he was ever in the happiest vein—Lamb expatiated upon the moving very much in the style of his later essays:



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I am going to change my lodgings, having received a hint that it would be agreeable, at our Lady's next feast. I have partly fixed upon most delectable rooms, which look out (when you stand a tip-toe) over the Thames and Surrey Hills, at the upper end of King's Bench walks in the Temple. There I shall have all the privacy of a house without the encumbrance, and shall be able to lock my friends out as often as I desire to hold free converse with my immortal mind; for my present lodgings resemble a minister's levee, I have so increased my acquaintance (as they call 'em), since I have resided in town. Like the country mouse, that had tasted a little of urban manners, I long to be nibbling my own cheese by my dear self without mouse-traps and time-traps. By my new plan, I shall be as airy, up four pair of stairs, as in the country; and in a garden, in the midst of enchanting, more than Mahometan paradise, London, whose dirtiest, drab-frequented alley, and her lowest-bowing tradesman, I would not exchange for Skiddaw, Helvellyn James, Walter, and the parson into the bargain. O! her lamps of a night! her rich goldsmiths, print-shops, toy-shops, mercers, hardwaremen, pastry-cooks! St. Paul's churchyard! the Strand! Exeter Change! Charing Cross, with the man *upon* a black horse! These are thy gods, O London! Ain't you mightily moped on the banks of the Cam? Had you not better come and set up here? You can't think what a difference. All the streets and pavements are pure gold, I warrant you. At least I know an alchemy that turns her mud into that metal,—a mind that loves to be at home in crowds.

Here we have the voice of the best of London-lovers, and here we have also a hint of the way in which he was finding himself too much "accompanied"—to use a phrase from one of his unpublished letters. He frequently chafed against the number of visitors who ate up his day, and at times had even to resent the way in which an intimate friend would be over-zealous in entertaining him, when for his own part he would rather have been alone. One special evening in each week was set apart for cards and conversation, and those occasions are perhaps among the best remembered features of early nineteenth-century literary life. Representative evenings will be found described in various works.[3] The company was not limited to literary folk, though many notable men of letters were to be met there, along with humbler friends, for the Lambs were catholic in their friendships, and had nothing of the exclusiveness of more pretentious salons. "We play at whist, eat cold meat and hot potatoes, and any gentleman that chooses smokes." At these gatherings Mary Lamb moved about observantly looking after her diverse guests, while Lamb himself, it has been said, might be depended upon for at once the wisest and the wittiest utterance of the evening. Here it was that he made his whimsical reproach to a player with dirty hands: "I say, Martin, if dirt were trumps what a hand you'd have." And it was on some such occasion, too, that he retorted on Wordsworth, who had said that the writing of "Hamlet" was not so very wonderful: "Here's Wordsworth says he could have written 'Hamlet'—*if he had the mind.*"



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[Footnote 3: In Talfourd's "Memorials" of Lamb; in Hazlitt's essay "Of Persons One would wish to have Seen."]

In the opening years of the century Lamb contributed epigrams and paragraphs to "The Albion," "The Morning Chronicle," and "The Morning Post" (thanks to Coleridge's introduction). His latest contribution to the first-named journal helped to bring about its sudden demise. One of the latest which was pointed at Sir James Mackintosh (author of "Vindicae Gallicae") may serve as a specimen of the personal epigram in which Lamb considered himself happiest:

Though thou'rt like Judas an apostate black,  
In the resemblance one thing thou dost lack,  
When he had gotten his ill-purchased pelf,  
He went away and wisely hanged himself;  
This thou may'st do at last; yet much I doubt,  
If thou hast any bowels to gush out.

Lamb's position after ten years at the India House had no doubt considerably improved, but he was glad of the opportunity of making an additional couple of guineas a week as epigrammatist to "The Morning Post." He did not, however, continue long at the work; it was too severe a tax to be ever wondering how this, that, or the other person or event could be hit off in a few lines of copy, and the irksomeness he felt, combined with the editorial exactions, caused him to give it up. In 1802 came a memorable visit by the Lambs to Coleridge at Keswick, a visit which resulted in Charles Lamb's thinking kindlier of mountains than he had hitherto done, without in any way lessening his strong local attachment to the metropolis. Of the day in which he climbed Skiddaw he said: "It was a day that will stand out, like a mountain, I am sure, in my life"; a happy simile which would not have occurred to one who stood, so to speak, on a familiar footing with mountains.

The life in the Temple was roughly divided into two portions: the first, at Mitre Court Buildings, extended from the spring of 1801 to that of 1809; then there seems to have been a brief stay of a few weeks at 34, Southampton Buildings, Holborn, and at the end of the following May or beginning of June, the Lambs moved into 4, Inner Temple Lane, which "looks out upon a gloomy churchyard-like court, called Hare Court, with thin trees and a pump in it.... I was born near it, and used to drink at that pump when I was a Rechabite of six years old." Here Lamb and his sister lived until 1817, continuing in their pleasant weekly evenings to afford a memorable centre for the meeting of memorable men. At one of these meetings when it was being debated, whom it was the different members of the company would like best to meet from among the notable men of letters of the past, Lamb promptly fixed upon Sir Thomas Browne and Fulke Greville. How many of us in such a debate to-day would as promptly name Charles Lamb!



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During the first half of these years in the Temple, Charles Lamb had written much that now endears him to us; but little, it is to be feared, that made the great body of contemporary readers aware of his existence. In 1806 he essayed dramatic authorship, had had his farce, "Mr. H.," performed at Drury Lane, had been present on the occasion of its solitary appearance when it was incontinently damned, and had himself taken part in the damnatory hissing. At the beginning of 1807 was published the "Tales from Shakspeare," for which he and his sister were jointly responsible, and for which they received a sum of sixty guineas; in 1808 came another book for children in "The Adventures of Ulysses," and in the same year the "Specimens of English Dramatic Poets Contemporary with Shakspeare."

During the second half of the stay in the Temple—the years at 4, Inner Temple Lane, which have been regarded as the happiest portion of his life—Lamb made but slight advance in literary reputation, but he was already firmly established in the favour of the few who had been privileged to know him, to hear his stammered wit, his spoken wisdom. Though this period from 1809 to 1817 is not marked by the production of notable books, it was during this time that he contributed to Leigh Hunt's "Reflector," wrote his "Recollections of Christ's Hospital" for the "Gentleman's Magazine," and his "Confessions of a Drunkard" for a friend's publication. Here were most Elia-like precursors of the famous "Essays."

In the autumn of 1817 the Lambs removed from the Temple in which they had passed the greater part of their lives, taking rooms over a brazier's shop at 20, Russell Street, Covent Garden, at the corner of Bow Street, where, as Mary Lamb put it, they had "Drury Lane Theatre in sight of our front, and Covent Garden from our back windows." Covent Garden, as Charles said, "dearer to me than any garden of Alcinous, where we are morally sure of the earliest peas and 'sparagus.'" One of the first letters from the new lodgings Lamb whimsically addressed as from "The Garden of England." The half dozen years during which he lived here forms from a literary point of view the most memorable period of Lamb's life. Here he arranged for the publication of the two precious little volumes of his "Works" which were issued in the summer of 1818—volumes which he found "admirably adapted for giving away," having no exaggerated idea of the sensation which the publication was likely to make. That publication was arranged, apparently, at the request of the publishers, the brothers Ollier, whom he now numbered among his friends. Writing to Southey of the venture he said: "I do not know whether I have done a silly thing or a wise one, but it is of no great consequence. I run no risk and care for no censure." Here in Russell Street Lamb continued his sociable weekly evenings—changed from Wednesdays to Thursdays—here, indeed, he had to chafe anew at the difficulty of having

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himself to himself; he was never C. L., he declared, but always C. L. and Co. He had, indeed, something of a genius for friendship; however much he might wish to be alone, he was, there can be little doubt, ever genial, ever his wise and whimsical self, even when suffering under the untimely advent of “Mr. Hazlitt, Mr. Martin Burney, or Morgan Demigorgon”; he had to suffer—or imagine that he suffered—from the effects of a personal charm of which he was wholly unaware; but if he had not been so friendly accessible the world would probably have lacked record of many of the delightful hints which help towards our realization of one of the most attractive personalities in our literary history.

[Illustration: *Sketch of Charles Lamb at the age of forty-four.*

*By G. F. Joseph, A.R.A.*

From the original in the Print Room of the British Museum.]

Lamb was already in middle age—in his forty-sixth year—when there came to him an opportunity of expressing himself in the way best suited to his genius. Early in 1820 there was started a new periodical under the simple title of “The London Magazine.” Several of Lamb’s friends were among the contributors, and he also was probably invited to write for it at an early date. His first contribution appeared in the number for August signed “Elia” (call it “Ellia,” said he), the name having occurred to Lamb’s memory as that of a whilom fellow-clerk of his thirty years earlier at the South Sea House; for several years he continued his contributions to this remarkable miscellany, finding in the personal informal essay the most congenial medium for expressing his mature wisdom, his whimsical humour, his radiant wit. By the close of 1822 there were essays enough to make a volume, and in 1823, such duly appeared. Even with this Lamb was not to touch popularity—it may be doubted whether he ever did that in his lifetime. He was known, admired, loved by a large circle of friends and acquaintances, but his work made little impression, we may believe, upon the wider reading public; it was, however, fully appreciated by those of his contemporaries best able to judge, and “Elia” came to be recognized as one of the literary mainstays of a magazine which counted among its contributors, De Quincey, Allan Cunningham, B. W. Procter, William Hazlitt, Hartley Coleridge, Horace Smith, and many more writers of note in their day.

Little more than six months after Lamb’s first essay signed “Elia” had appeared in the “London,” the editor of that magazine was wounded in a duel and died, and in the summer of 1821 the periodical changed hands, but retained its brilliant staff of contributors, and acquired the services of Thomas Hood, then a young man of two-and-twenty, as a “sort of sub-editor.” The new proprietors gave monthly dinners to their writers, and here Lamb would meet some of his old friends and many new. Hood has recorded his first meeting with Elia in the offices of the magazine, and his account may be quoted, affording as it does something like a glimpse of Lamb in his habit as he lived at the time of the full maturity of his powers:



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I was sitting one morning beside our Editor, busily correcting proofs, when a visitor was announced, whose name, grumbled by a low ventriloquial voice, like Tom Pipes calling from the hold through the hatchway, did not resound distinctly on my tympanum. However, the door opened, and in came a stranger,—a figure remarkable at a glance, with a fine head, on a small spare body, supported by two almost immaterial legs. He was clothed in sables, of a bygone fashion, but there was something wanting, or something present about him, that certified he was neither a divine, nor a physician, nor a school master: from a certain neatness and sobriety in his dress, coupled with his sedate bearing, he might have been taken, but that such a costume would be anomalous, for a *Quaker* in black. He looked still more like (what he really was) a literary Modern Antique, a New-Old Author, a living anachronism, contemporary at once with Burton the Elder, and Colman the Younger. Meanwhile he advanced with rather a peculiar gait, his walk was plantigrade, and with a cheerful “How d’ye do,” and one of the blandest, sweetest smiles that ever brightened a manly countenance, held out two fingers to the Editor. The two gentlemen in black soon fell into discourse; and whilst they conferred the Lavater principle within me set to work upon the interesting specimen thus presented to its speculations. It was a striking intellectual face, full of wiry lines, physiognomical quips and cranks, that gave it great character. There was much earnestness about the brows, and a deal of speculation in the eyes, which were brown and bright, and “quick in turning”; the nose, a decided one, though of no established order; and there was a handsome smartness about the mouth. Altogether it was no common face—none of those *willow-pattern* ones, which Nature turns out by thousands at her potteries;—but more like a chance specimen of the Chinese ware, one to the set—unique, antique, quaint. No one who had once seen it, could pretend not to know it again. It was no face to lend its countenance to any confusion of persons in a Comedy of Errors. You might have sworn to it piecemeal,—a separate affidavit for every feature. In short his face was as original as his figure; his figure as his character; his character as his writings; his writings the most original of the age. After the literary business had been settled, the Editor invited his contributor to dinner, adding “we shall have a hare”—

“And—and—and—and many friends?”

The hesitation in the speech, and the readiness of the allusion were alike characteristic of the individual, who his familiars will perchance have recognized already as the delightful Essayist, the capital Critic, the pleasant Wit and Humorist, the delicate-minded and large-hearted Charles Lamb!

This gives us at once something of a glimpse of Lamb as he appeared to the eyes of his contemporaries, and an indication of the impression which his genius had made on another man of genius. With his *Elia* essays he may be said to have crowned his achievements in the eyes of those who knew him, and, in fact, his active work, or that part of it which counts, may be said to have ended with the production of these essays, which he wrote at first for the “London,” and occasionally later for other periodicals.

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In 1823 came another removal. During the summer, or when busy over some piece of writing, Lamb had stayed a while at Dalston or other semi-rural place away from the time-wasting friends and fascinations of town. Thus when it was decided to leave Russell Street the move was made to semi-suburban quietude and retirement.

When you come London-ward you will find me no longer in Covt Gard. I have a Cottage, in Colebrook row, Islington. A cottage, for it is detach'd; a white house, with 6 good rooms; the New River (rather elderly by this time) runs (if a moderate walking pace can be so termed) close to the foot of the house; and behind is a spacious garden, with vines (I assure you), pears, strawberries, parsnips, leeks, carrots, cabbages, to delight the heart of old Alcinous. You enter without passage into a cheerful dining-room, all studded over and rough with old Books, and above is a lightsome Drawing-room 3 windows, full of choice prints. I feel like a great Lord, never having had a house before....I heard of you from Mr. Pulham this morning, and that gave a fillip to my Laziness, which has been intolerable. But I am so taken up with pruning and gardening, quite a new sort of occupation to me. I have gather'd my Jargonels, but my Windsor Pears are backward. The former were of exquisite raciness. I do now sit under my own vine, and contemplate the growth of vegetable nature. I can now understand in what sense they speak of *father Adam*. I recognize the paternity, while I watch my tulips.

Were Lamb a matter-of-fact correspondent it might be pointed out that tulips are not much to watch in September. During the winter of 1824-5 he suffered from ill health, and in April, 1825, he was allowed to retire from the East India House with a pension of two-thirds of his salary, less a small sum to assure an annuity for his sister in the event of his dying first. For thirty-three years had he continued in his office, and his salary had gradually grown from the modest L70 of the beginning to ten times that amount at his retirement, so that he became a superannuated man with an income ample for the modest requirements of himself and Mary. On the subject of his retirement he wrote some touching letters to friends such as Wordsworth and Bernard Barton, and also in his accustomed manner made the crucial event the subject of a delightful "Elia" essay. He had before expatiated on the excellent position of the authors who were not "authors for bread"—men who like himself were employed in business during the day and had to dally with literature in off hours. Certainly Lamb's "hack work," the work done for the booksellers during the early part of the century, was his least memorable achievement, and we cannot help feeling what a boon it was to Lamb himself and to Letters that he was chained so long to the desk's dead wood, instead of being dependent on the favour of the booksellers for his livelihood, and upon the popular taste of the moment for his themes.



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In 1820, during a summer holiday at Cambridge, Lamb met an orphan girl, Emma Isola, then eleven years of age, whom he and Mary later adopted, and the letters have many references to the welcome companionship of Emma, who gave something of a new interest in life to the brother and sister.[4] In 1827 the household removed again, this time to the Chase, Enfield. Two years later they gave up the house of their own and boarded with a Mr. and Mrs. Westwood, their next-door neighbours. In 1833 Mary, who had had frequently to be “from home,” as it has been euphemistically put, was under the charge of Mr. and Mrs. Walden at Bay Tree Cottage, Edmonton, when Charles decided to live under the same roof with her, even during her periods of mental derangement, and followed her thither, in

The not unpeaceful evening of a day  
Made black by morning storms.

[Footnote 4: Emma Isola married Edward Moxon, the publisher.]

How much Mary’s companionship meant to him may be gathered from an open-hearted letter which he had written in 1805 to Dorothy Wordsworth—and it meant no less in the years that followed:

I have every reason to suppose that this illness, like all her former ones, will be but temporary; but I cannot always feel so. Meantime she is dead to me and I miss a prop. All my strength is gone, and I am like a fool, bereft of her co-operation. I dare not think, lest I should think wrong; so used am I to look up to her in the least and the biggest perplexity. To say all that I know of her would be more than I think anybody could believe, or even understand; and when I hope to have her well again with me, it would be sinning against her feelings to go about to praise her; for I can conceal nothing that I do from her. She is older and wiser and better than I, and all my wretched imperfections I cover to myself by resolutely thinking on her goodness. She would share life and death, heaven and hell, with me. She lives but for me.

On 25th July, 1834, Coleridge died, and the blow was a terrible one to Charles Lamb; “we die many deaths before we die,” he had said of the departure of friends; and the passing of Coleridge may be said to have come as a fatal shock, for he survived him but five months, and during that time was heard to say again and again, as though the fact were too stupendous to believe, not to be realized, “Coleridge is dead!” Taking his usual morning walk in the fourth week of December, Lamb stumbled and fell, bruising his face; the bruise did not seem serious, but erysipelas supervened, and on 27th December, 1834, the beloved friend, the noble man, passed into the great silence. He was buried in Edmonton Churchyard, and there, nearly thirteen years later, was laid by him the dear sister who had so long watched over him, whom he had so long guarded.

\* \* \* \* \*

“‘Saint Charles,’ said Thackeray to me, thirty years ago, putting one of Charles Lamb’s letters to his forehead.”[5]



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[Footnote 5: Edward FitzGerald's "Letters."]

### HIS PRINCIPAL WRITINGS

The writings of Charles Lamb fall more or less naturally into four or five groups—with, of course, inevitable overlappings—and it is better to consider them thus, rather than in the strict order of their production.

### POETRY

It was in poetry that he made his first essays, as we have seen, and this is not to be wondered at in one who had early read the old poetic treasures of our literature, and in the close companion of so deeply poetic a man as Coleridge. He was, indeed, himself essentially a poet, though his work in verse falls far below that which he achieved in prose. The perusal of a slim volume of the sonnets of William Lisle Bowles was the small occasion from which sprang the great event of Lamb's and Coleridge's commencing to write poetry. To the sonnet form Lamb returned again and again, sometimes most felicitously, for two or three of his sonnets have that haunting quality which makes them remain in the mind. This one, with its familiar close, may stand as representative of the days when Bowles was still the god of his poetic idolatry:

The Lord of Life shakes off his drowsihed,  
And 'gins to sprinkle on the earth below  
Those rays that from his shaken locks do flow;  
Meantime, by truant love of rambling led,  
I turn my back on thy detested walls,  
Proud City! and thy sons, I leave behind,  
A sordid, selfish, money-getting kind;  
Brute things, who shut their ears when Freedom calls.

I pass not thee so lightly, well-known spire,  
That minded me of many a pleasure gone,  
Of merrier days, of love and Islington;  
Kindling afresh the flames of past desire.  
And I shall muse on thee, slow journeying on  
To the green plains of pleasant Hertfordshire.

In his blank verse—and couplets—of the same period, the time when he was yet in the early twenties of his age, Lamb shows himself an apt disciple of Cowper (to whom, by the way, he addressed a brief poem in this form "On His Recovery from an Indisposition"). These, however, were but the steps of a born writer learning his craft by more or less conscious imitation, and Lamb was not long in finding his feet and



indicating his peculiar individuality. He had learned much from the free expressions of the old dramatic poets, and in such pieces as “The Old Familiar Faces”—a poignant cry from a suffering soul—or in his unconventional sonnet, “The Gipsy’s Malison,” written more than thirty years later, we have some of the most markedly individual of his poems. He was not a poet, he declared—running counter to the judgement of some of his later critics—but essentially a prosaic writer. All that he wrote in verse, apart from the plays, would come within



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the compass of a small volume, and perhaps half of that would be occupied with album verses, slight *vers d'occasion*, such as are more often the products of prose-writers' leisure than of a poet who sings because he must. He felt his way to prose through poetry as so many lesser writers have done, and on the way uttered perhaps a dozen pieces, which for one reason or another will ever make a lasting appeal to readers. The sense of tragedy in "The Old Familiar Faces"—more remarkable in that it was tragedy realized and expressed at the age of three-and-twenty—the weird imagination of "The Gipsy's Malison," the sweet portraiture of "Hester," the fancy of "A Farewell to Tobacco," and the "Ode to the Treadmill," will ensure that portion of his work to which they belong, sharing the immortality of the essays of Elia.

### THE DRAMA

As an earnest student of dramatic literature Lamb early turned his attention to the theatre, and was moved with an ambition to write for the stage. In his twenty-fourth year he started upon a piece to be entitled "Pride's Cure," and his letters about this time contain many references to its progress and give various extracts from it—extracts which by themselves might suggest that the play would be a notable one, but the event turned out otherwise. At the end of 1799 the piece was submitted under the title of "John Woodvil" to Kemble, and a year later it was rejected. "John Woodvil" is poor indeed as a play; it has some capital scenes, it has some beautiful passages, but of dramatic story or characterization there is nothing. The play is concerned with the fortunes of the Woodvils, a Devonshire family, at the time of the Restoration. Sir Walter Woodvil is a Cromwellian, living in hiding with his younger son, Simon, while John holds high revel with boon companions. Sir Walter's ward, Margaret, who is beloved by John, finds that young man's affection cooling, and thus leaves him and goes (disguised as a boy) to join her guardian in Sherwood Forest. Then John, in a moment of intoxication, blabs to one of his companions of his proscribed father's whereabouts, and follows it up by quarrelling with that companion, who forthwith sets off with another to arrest Sir Walter. The old man believes that his son has betrayed him and promptly dies of a broken heart. The play ends with the reconciliation of John and Margaret. A ridiculously slight story for a five-act play. Much in the writing of it shows the author's loving study of seventeenth-century models, as may be seen from this speech of Simon's on being asked what are the sports he and his father use in the forest:

Not many; some few, as thus:—  
To see the sun to bed, and to arise,  
Like some hot amourist with glowing eyes,  
Bursting the lazy bands of sleep that bound him,  
With all his fires and travelling glories round him.  
Sometimes the moon on soft



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night clouds to rest,

Like beauty nestling in a young man's breast,  
And all the winking stars, her handmaids, keep  
Admiring silence, while those lovers sleep.

Sometimes outstretcht, in very idleness,  
Nought doing, saying little, thinking less,  
To view the leaves, thin dancers upon air,  
Go eddying round; and small birds, how they fare,  
When mother Autumn fills their beaks with corn,  
Filch'd from the careless Amalthea's horn;  
And how the woods berries and worms provide  
Without their pains, when earth has nought beside  
To answer their small wants.

To view the graceful deer come tripping by,  
Then stop, and gaze, then turn, they know not why,  
Like bashful youngers in society.

To mark the structure of a plant or tree,  
And all fair things of earth, how fair they be.

Lamb's next attempt on the theatre was the prose farce of "Mr. H——," in which a wholly inadequate motif was made to supply material for two acts. The piece was played once (Drury Lane, 10th December, 1806) and damned. The eponymous hero, who chooses to be known merely by his initial, creates quite a sensation at Bath, as he is believed to be a nobleman travelling incognito. Hitherto always rejected by the ladies on account of his unfortunate patronym, he has wooed successfully under an initial, when he nearly spoils all by betraying that his name is—Hogsflesh! He is forthwith shunned, but his ladylove remains faithful to him on his making the very natural change of Hogsflesh into Bacon. In his method and atmosphere, Lamb had passed from the seventeenth to the late eighteenth century; he got a hearing, but he did not get—and it must be admitted that he did not deserve—success. The farce is interesting as containing in an inquisitive landlord, Jeremiah Pry, the original, it may be assumed, of a whole family of Paul Prys, of which to-day John Poole's is the best remembered.

Two other dramatic pieces were written by Lamb in his later years: "The Wife's Trial, or, The Intruding Widow" (founded upon Crabbe's "The Confidant"), in blank verse, and a second farce, "The Pawnbroker's Daughter," in prose. In these two pieces he had made distinct advances, yet neither was perhaps suited for stage representation. In "The Wife's Trial" we have a couple—Mr. and Mrs. Selby—five years married, on whose hospitality a widow forces herself owing to some mysterious hold which she has over the wife. Mrs. Selby had been secretly married as a schoolgirl, though her husband left her at the church door and had died abroad. The widow striving to use this knowledge for purposes not far removed from blackmail, is neatly hoist with her own petard, and



the slight play ends with the cordial reconciliation of the Selbys. In “The Pawnbroker’s Daughter” once more the story is of the slightest, though the farce seems more fitted for the stage than “Mr. H——.” Marion, the



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daughter of a pawnbroker, is, against her father's wishes, wooed by a gentleman, and, thanks to the trick of a maid, goes off with her lover while carrying some valuable jewels with which her father has entrusted her. There are two other lovers, Pendulous—who has been unjustly hanged and only reprieved just in time to save his life—and Marian Flyn, and out of their by-play comes the reconciliation of all. The feelings of the half-hanged man had earlier been dealt with by Lamb in a letter "On the Inconveniences Resulting from being Hanged," which he contributed (as "Pensilis") to "The Reflector" in 1811.

## STORIES

After essaying poetry and the drama (for both of which he maintained a lifelong liking, writing in each form during his latest years), the next kind of literary expression on which Lamb ventured was that of stories and verses for children. In "Rosamund Gray," which is scarcely a tale for children but rather a classic novelette, he gives the story of a young orphan girl living at Widford in Hertfordshire with her blind grandmother. The girl is beloved by young Allan Clare, and one evening, wandering in sheer joy over the scenes of past delightful rambles, she is assailed by a villain. Her blind grandmother finding her gone from the cottage dies of a broken heart, and poor Rosamund, disgraced and terrified, seeks the home of Allan and his sister and there dies. It is a terrible story told with a beautiful simplicity. Of how far it may have been founded on fact we do not know, but in Rosamund, Lamb seems to have depicted something of a likeness of the "fair-haired maid" with whom he had been in love, and in Elinor Clare there can be no doubt that he portrayed much of the character of his own loved sister.

The first of Lamb's known publications professedly for children was "The King and Queen of Hearts: showing how notably the Queen made her Tarts, and how scurvily the Knave stole them away: with other particulars pertaining thereto," and this was only recovered about ten years since after having been forgotten for the best part of a century. The booklet, which was issued anonymously, consists of a number of rough pictures, each accompanied by half a dozen lines of Hudibrastic verse; the inspiration being of course the old nursery rhyme about the tarts made by the Queen of Hearts and their subsequent fate.

The "Tales from Shakspeare," which followed, were written by both Charles Lamb and his sister: indeed the work seems at first to have been intended for Mary's hand alone, but her brother undertook the telling of the stories of the tragedies, and to use his own words, out of the twenty tales he was "responsible for Lear, Macbeth, Timon, Romeo, Hamlet, Othello, for occasionally a tail-piece or correction of grammar, for none of the cuts, and for all of the spelling." When the work was originally produced it had illustrations to which Lamb objected.

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His reference to tail-pieces is possibly an indication that he sometimes rounded off the stories for his sister, just as he certainly completed the preface for her. Though the dual authorship of the volume is referred to in the preface the publisher put Charles Lamb's name as author of the whole on the title-page of the book. The "Tales" are of course designed for young readers—they are told, as it has been recognized, with a kind of Wordsworthian simplicity—as an introduction to "the rich treasures from which the small and valueless coins are extracted." How admirably they have served their purpose for generations of readers is to be seen in the long succession of editions in which the work has been issued.

Again did brother and sister collaborate in the next of the children's books associated with the name of Lamb, and again Charles was responsible for but about a third of the whole. Of the ten tales in "Mrs. Leicester's School" he wrote but three. These stories, which are supposed to be told by young girls to their school-mates, are simple records of childish experiences recounted with childish naivete. They met with some success during the lifetime of their authors—ten editions being disposed of in something under twenty years—and still hold their own, both as gift books for the young and as parts of that wonderfully varied, yet almost wholly delightful body of literature, associated with the name of Lamb. Here, as later in the "Essays of Elia," we have recollections of the actual events of their own childhood permeating the invented narratives and imparting a new interest to the whole. Coleridge prophesied remarkably about this little book, when in talking to a friend he said:

It at once soothes and amuses me to think—nay, to know—that the time will come when this little volume of my dear and well-nigh oldest friend, Mary Lamb, will be not only enjoyed but acknowledged as a rich jewel in the treasury of our permanent English literature; and I cannot help running over in my mind the long list of celebrated writers, astonishing geniuses, Novels, Romances, Poems, Histories, and dense Political Economy quartos, which, compared with "Mrs. Leicester's School," will be remembered as often and praised as highly as Wilkie's and Glover's Epics and Lord Bolingbroke's Philosophies compared with "Robinson Crusoe!"

In the "Adventures of Ulysses" Lamb sought to provide what he termed a supplement to Fenelon's long-popular "Adventures of Telemachus." He took the story from Chapman's translation of Homer's "Odyssey," that translation which a few years later was to inspire John Keats with one of his finest sonnets. In a preface, a model of concise expression, the author of the tale explained:



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By avoiding the prolixity which marks the speeches and the descriptions in Homer, I have gained a rapidity to the narration which I hope will make it more attractive, and give it more the air of a romance, to young readers; though I am sensible that, by the curtailment, I have sacrificed in many places the manners to the passion, the subordinate characteristics to the essential interests of the story. The attempt is not to be considered as seeking a comparison with any of the direct translations of the "Odyssey," either in prose or verse; though if I were to state the obligations which I have had to one obsolete version, I should run the hazard of depriving myself of the very slender degree of reputation which I could hope to acquire from a trifle like the present undertaking.

If Chapman's translation of Homer was "obsolete" in 1808, it was yet to be restored to the favour of readers, thanks to the loving homage of Lamb and Keats. "Chapman is divine," wrote the author of the "Adventures of Ulysses" to a friend, "and my abridgement has not quite emptied him of his divinity." In his story Lamb shows how he had recognized the moral value of the story of Ulysses, of "a brave man struggling with adversity," but wisely leaves that moral to be insensibly impressed upon the reader, for he not only refrained from formulating a definite "moral" in such a case, but has explicitly recorded his repugnance from the method.

## VERSES

In "Poetry for Children" we have again a work for which brother and sister were jointly responsible, and again—though we cannot exactly allot the parts—Charles, as we learn from his letters, wrote but about one third of the whole. Three years after publication the two small volumes in which this work had been issued were out of print, though a number of the pieces were included by the publisher in a "Poetry Book" compilation. In 1827 Lamb wanted a copy and could not get it, indeed the little work had disappeared in the most complete fashion, and another half century was to pass before a copy was to be recovered, and then it came from Australia, closely followed by one of an American edition, "pirated" in 1812. It is strange that Charles and Mary Lamb, "an old bachelor and an old maid," as he put it, should have been so successful as caterers for children. That they were successful there is no doubt, and there is no reason why this "Poetry for Children" of theirs should not—now happily recovered in its entirety—go on pleasing and influencing many generations of young readers; that they *do* please the little ones of to-day I have readily proved. The verses are on the simplest themes, set forth in varied metres, but chiefly such metres as children can most readily remember, and though they are for the most part didactic, they are didactic in a way which the child does not resent. There is no telling a tale and then trying to enforce a moral from its consideration, but the moral is a natural part of the whole, and doubtless has its healthy effect.



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“Prince Dorus” is a pleasant little story in easy verse, telling of a king who fell in love with a great Princess, but was in despair because his love was not required:

“This to the King a courteous Fairy told  
And bade the Monarch in his suit be bold;  
For he that would the charming Princess wed,  
Had only on her cat’s black tail to tread,  
When straight the Spell would vanish into air,  
And he enjoy for life the yielding fair.”

At length he succeeds in this seemingly simple exploit, and in place of the cat there springs up a huge man who foretells that when married the King shall have a son afflicted with a huge nose, a son who shall never be happy in his love:

Till he with tears his blemish shall confess  
Discern its odious length and wish it less.

It is a pleasant little story marked with Lamb’s keen sense of humour.

“Beauty and the Beast” is a booklet in verse for young readers. It was published shortly after “Prince Dorus,” and is believed—though the evidence as to authorship is inconclusive—to have been written by Charles or Mary Lamb. It is a simple rendering in Hudibrastic verse of a familiar nursery story. Perhaps a very slight piece of evidence in favour of the Lamb authorship may be found in the fact that it shares with “Prince Dorus” the sub-title, “A Poetical Version of an Ancient Tale.”

## CRITICISM

In the mid-part of the period during which Charles Lamb was writing, either on his own account or in collaboration with his sister, the books for children to which reference has just been made, he was also engaged upon the work which was to bring him before the world as a great critic, as the first of the Neo-Elizabethans if I may substitute that nickname for the time-honoured one which calls him the last of the Elizabethans. For us, to-day, with our bountiful acknowledgment of all that we owe to the great body of dramatic poets who flourished during the latter part of the sixteenth century and the first half of the seventeenth, for us with our many collected editions of the works of these men it is somewhat difficult to realize the benighted condition in which our fellows were situated a century ago. Elizabethan drama to by far the greater number of our great grandparents meant Shakespeare and Shakespeare alone; to us Shakespeare is only the sun of a great dramatic planetary system, and the corrected view is largely owing to the efforts of one revolutionary critic, and that critic was Charles Lamb. His earliest letters show that he had revelled in this by-way of literature, and had there found much that was of the best comparatively forgotten, or at least wholly neglected, and he gladly

availed himself of an opportunity afforded for selecting striking passages from the English dramatic poets. "Specimens are becoming fashionable," he wrote. "We have 'Specimens of Ancient English Poets,'



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'Specimens of Modern English Poets,' 'Specimens of Ancient English Prose Writers,' without end. They used to be called 'Beauties'! You have seen 'Beauties of Shakspeare'? so have many people that never saw any beauties in Shakspeare." Lamb was not by any means, however, an imitator of the unfortunate clerical forger, Dodd, in the scheme which he had in hand. When we turn to the "Specimens" themselves we discover them to be fine indeed, and in reading them and the brief but pregnant notes upon them, we marvel at the sureness of the touch and the maturity of the writer. The notes, or commentary, rarely extend beyond a score of lines, and are most often far below that, yet they are always wonderfully pertinent; there is "no philology, no antiquarianism, no discussion of difficult or corrupt passages," no pedantry in fact, or dry-as-dustism. It must not be forgotten when we look over the volume with scenes from the plays of Kyd, Peele, Marlowe, Dekker, Marston, Chapman, Heywood, Middleton, Tourneur, Webster, Ford, Jonson, Beaumont, Fletcher, Massinger, Shirley and others—it must not be forgotten that Lamb was pleading the merits of these dramatic poets before a generation to which some of them were but names and the rest practically non-existent. The suggestion which Lamb throws out in the preface that he had desired to show "how much of Shakspeare shines in the great men his contemporaries" is amply borne out in his brief notes upon his selections. This can best be proved by giving some of the editorial comments from the collection itself, comments which fully establish Lamb in his high place among the clearest sighted if least voluminous of our true critics:

Heywood is a sort of *prose* Shakspeare. His scenes are to the full as natural and affecting. But we miss *the Poet*, that which in Shakspeare always appears out and above the surface of *the nature*. Heywood's characters, his Country Gentlemen, *etc.*, are exactly what we see (but of the best kind of what we see) in life. Shakspeare makes us believe, while we are among his lovely creations, that they are nothing but what we are familiar with, as in dreams new things seem old: but we awake, and sigh for the difference.

\* \* \* \* \*

The insipid levelling morality to which the modern stage is tied down would not admit of such admirable passions as these scenes are filled with. A Puritanical obtuseness of sentiment, a stupid infantile goodness, is creeping among us, instead of the vigorous passions and virtues clad in flesh and blood, with which the old dramatists present us. Those noble and liberal casuists could discern in the differences, the quarrels, the animosities of man, a beauty and truth of moral feeling, no less than in the iterately inculcated duties of forgiveness and atonement. With us all is hypocritical meekness. A reconciliation scene (let the occasion be never so absurd or



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unnatural) is always sure of applause. Our audiences come to the theatre to be complimented on their goodness. They compare notes with the amiable characters in the play, and find a wonderful similarity of disposition between them. We have a common stock of dramatic morality out of which a writer may be supplied without the trouble of copying from originals within his own breast. To know the boundaries of honour, to be judiciously valiant, to have a temperance which shall beget a smoothness in the angry swellings of youth, to esteem life as nothing when the sacred reputation of a parent is to be defended, yet to shake and tremble under a pious cowardice when that ark of an honest confidence is found to be frail and tottering, to feel the true blows of a real disgrace blunting that sword which the imaginary strokes of a supposed false imputation had put so keen an edge upon but lately; to do, or to imagine this done in a feigned story, asks something more of a moral sense, somewhat a greater delicacy of perception in questions of right and wrong, than goes to the writing of two or three hackneyed sentences about the laws of honour as opposed to the laws of the land or a commonplace against duelling. Yet such things would stand a writer nowadays in far better stead than Captain Ager and his conscientious honour; and he would be considered a far better teacher of morality than old Rowley or Middleton if they were living.

\* \* \* \* \*

Though some resemblance may be traced between the Charms in Macbeth and the Incantations in this Play, which is supposed to have preceded it, this coincidence will not detract much from the originality of Shakspeare. His Witches are distinguished from the Witches of Middleton by essential differences. These are creatures to whom man or woman plotting some dire mischief might resort for occasional consultation. Those originate deeds of blood, and begin bad impulses to men. From the moment that their eyes first meet with Macbeth's, he is spellbound. That meeting sways his destiny. He can never break the fascination. These Witches can hurt the body: those have power over the soul. Hecate in Middleton has a Son, a low buffoon: the hags of Shakspeare have neither child of their own, nor seem to be descended from any parent. They are foul Anomalies, of whom we know not whence they are sprung, nor whether they have beginning or ending. As they are without human passions, so they seem to be without human relations. They come with thunder and lightning, and vanish to airy music. This is all we know of them.—Except Hecate, they have no names; which heightens their mysteriousness. Their names, and some of the properties, which Middleton has given to his Hags, excite smiles. The Weird Sisters are serious things. Their presence cannot co-exist with mirth. But in a lesser degree the witches of Middleton are fine creations. Their power too is, in some measure, over the



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mind. They raise jars, jealousies, strife, *like a thick scurf o'er life*.

Here surely we have the right stuff. Terse, pregnant sentences; few words, but going to the very heart of the matter. That Lamb was justly proud of his pioneer work in this field of literary research is certain, for in a short autobiography which he prepared for a friend's album—in what has been called “the briefest, and perhaps the wittiest and most truthful autobiography in the language”—he wrote as follows:

He also was the first to draw the Public attention to the old English Dramatists, in a work called “Specimens of English Dramatic Writers who lived about the Time of Shakspeare,” published about fifteen years since.

Of Lamb's work in this field the elder Disraeli admirably said, “He carries us on through whole scenes by a true, unerring motion. His was a poetical mind, labouring in poetry.” Within the century that has elapsed since Lamb was engaged in exploring the forgotten old tomes in which lay buried so much excellent literature, the study which he started has taken its place as one of the most important of its kind, and a large library might be formed of the books and reprints which may be looked upon as direct descendants of that modest single octavo volume of 1808. During his later years Lamb devised something in the nature of a supplement when he prepared further extracts from the Garrick collection of plays in the British Museum for Hone's “Table Book” (1827), and these extracts are now generally bound up with the earlier ones in a single work.

## ESSAYS

In giving this summary account of Lamb's writings it has been thought best only to keep to a very roughly chronological method, leaving his letters to be touched upon last. Finding earliest expression in poetry, he then turned to the drama, fully equipped with knowledge and a fine enthusiasm, but lacking some of the most vitally essential qualities necessary to success; he then passed more or less by force of circumstance—the need of making money and the desire to help his sister in her newly-found work—to the writing of prose and verse for children; and later he began to make wider use of the fine critical instinct of which he had given early indications in his correspondence. All of these were to be in a measure overshadowed by his achievement as essayist. That work as essayist was chiefly the product of his prime—of the days of the “London Magazine”—but he had made several notable contributions of this character during the preceding twenty years; essays which are now to be found in different posthumous collections of his writings—“Eliana,” “Critical Essays,” “Essays and Sketches,” “Miscellaneous Prose,” and so on. When, thanks to the kindly offices of Coleridge, Lamb became a contributor to the “Morning Post,” he proposed to furnish some imitations of Burton, the

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author of the “Anatomy of Melancholy,” but these, not unnaturally, being adjudged unsuitable for a daily newspaper found a place in the “John Woodvil” volume of 1802. Yet it was in the journal named that on 1st February, 1802, appeared a brief Essay in the form of a letter on “The Londoner.” In this essay we have Lamb using the same phrases that he had employed a year earlier in writing to Wordsworth. In 1811-14 Lamb was contributing essays (including “On the Inconveniences Resulting from Being Hanged,” “Recollections of Christ’s Hospital,” and on “The Melancholy of Tailors”) to Leigh Hunt’s “Reflector,” to the “Gentleman’s Magazine,” and the “Champion.” Eight of these essays were included in the two volume “Works” of 1818.

It was with the establishment of the “London Magazine” in 1820 that, as has been said, Lamb’s great opportunity came and was greatly taken. The magazine began, as we have seen, in January, and the editor soon gathered around him a remarkably brilliant body of contributors. To their number in August was added “Elia,” whose modest signature—later to become perhaps the most widely-known pen-name in our literature—was appended to an article on “The South Sea House.” Thenceforward—with the occasional missing of a month here or there, balanced by other months presenting two—the essays appeared with such regularity that twenty-eight months later there were twenty-seven of the twenty-eight essays which were gathered into the volume published in 1823 as “The Essays of Elia.”

The publication of the essays in volume form did not by any means indicate that the author had worked out his vein; indeed, while the book was passing through the press he was writing other essays for the “London,” though not with the same regularity; afterwards he contributed to the “New Monthly” and other magazines. Such of this later work as he chose to preserve formed “The Last Essays of Elia,” published ten years after the earlier work.

## LETTERS

All through his working life as man of letters Lamb was engaged in manifesting that side of his genius which whilst known to but few persons during his lifetime was to be one of those most widely and most lovingly known afterwards. He was of the greatest of our letter-writers. It was perhaps but another aspect of the essayist—or rather we might say that his work as essayist was the crowning development of his sedulous habit of being himself when communing on paper with his intimate friends. It has been suggested that such finished works as are many of Lamb’s letters were, so to speak, built up bit by bit, and then copied as completed wholes before being despatched to those for whom they were designed. Whether written with a running pen, as a large proportion of them undoubtedly were, or written with the patience of the essayist ponderingly in search of the *mot juste*, they are always true Lamb, individual expressions far removed from the



ordinary letters of ordinary folk; they are at once informing revelations of the writer in his relations with his fellows, and they are always marked by essentially literary qualities. In his letters will be found not infrequently—both in idea and in expression—the germs of his essays.



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Lamb was first revealed to the reading public as a great letter-writer in Talfourd's "Memorials of Charles Lamb" nearly seventy years ago. Since that time each further publication of the letters has brought fresh material to light which has but gone to strengthen Lamb's position as one of the first two or three letter-writers whose epistles have taken their places in English literature. If we must "place" our great men, there are not wanting critics who would accord Lamb a position at the very head of those in this particular branch. "To an idler like myself, to write and receive letters are both very pleasant;" thus Lamb in one of his earliest letters to Coleridge, and there can be little doubt that in this occupation he frequently found the truth of the statement that the labour we delight in physics pain. In communion with men of kindred tastes he must often have lost the sense of his haunting troubles in intellectual and external interests.

Two or three scraps from the letters have been quoted in the first chapter but as their peculiarly rich wit and humour, using that much-abused word in its fullest significance, can best be shown by example, we may here give a couple more. The first is from a letter written in 1810, and addressed to Manning, the correspondent with whom Lamb was most entertainingly whimsical. The second letter, given in its entirety, was addressed in 1827 to Thomas Hood.

Holcroft had finished his life when I wrote to you, and Hazlitt has since finished his life—I do not mean his own life, but he has finished a life of Holcroft, which is going to press. Tuthill is Dr. Tuthill. I continue Mr. Lamb. I have published a little book for children on titles of honour: and to give them some idea of the difference of rank and gradual rising, I have made a little scale, supposing myself to receive the following various accessions of dignity from the king, who is the fountain of honour.—As at first, 1, Mr. C. Lamb; 2, C. Lamb, Esq.; 3, Sir C. Lamb, Bart.; 4, Baron Lamb of Stamford; 5, Viscount Lamb; 6, Earl Lamb; 7, Marquis Lamb; 8, Duke Lamb. It would look like quibbling to carry it on further, and especially as it is not necessary for children to go beyond the ordinary titles of sub-regal dignity in our own country, otherwise I have sometimes in my dreams imagined myself still advancing, as 9th, King Lamb; 10th, Emperor Lamb; 11th, Pope Innocent, higher than which is nothing but the Lamb of God. Puns I have not made many (nor punch much), since the day of my last; one I cannot help relating. A constable in Salisbury Cathedral was telling me that eight people dined at the top of the spire of the cathedral, upon which I remarked that they must be very sharp set. But in general I cultivate the reasoning part of my mind more than the imaginative. Do you know Kate \* \* \*. I am so stuffed out with eating turkey for dinner, and another turkey for supper yesterday (turkey in Europe and turkey in Asia), that I



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can't jog on. It is New Year here. That is, it was New Year half a year back, when I was writing this. Nothing puzzles me more than time and space, and yet nothing puzzles me less, for I never think about them. The Persian ambassador is the principal thing talked of now. I sent some people to see him worship the sun on Primrose Hill at half past six in the morning 28th November; but he did not come, which makes me think the old fire-worshippers are a sect almost extinct in Persia. Have you trampled on the Cross yet? The Persian ambassador's name is Shaw Ali Mirza. The common people call him Shaw Nonsense. While I think of it, I have put three letters besides my own three into the India post for you, from your brother, sister, and some gentleman whose name I forget. Will they, have they, did they, come safe? The distance you are at cuts up tenses by the root. DEAR HOOD,—If I have anything in my head I will send it to Mr. Watts. Strictly speaking he should have had my Album verses, but a very intimate friend importuned me for the trifles, and I believe I forgot Mr. Watts, or lost sight at the time of his similar Souvenir. Jamieson conveyed the farce from me to Mrs. C. Kemble, *he* will not be in town before the 27th. Give our kind loves to all at Highgate, and tell them that we have finally torn ourselves out right away from Colebrooke, where I had *no* health, and are about to domiciliate for good at Enfield, where I have experienced *good*.

“Lord what good hours do we keep!  
How quietly we sleep!”

See the rest in the Complete Angler. We have got our books into our new house. I am a drayhorse if I was not ashamed of the indigested dirty lumber as I toppled 'em out of the cart, and blest Becky that came with 'em for her having an unstuff'd brain with such rubbish. We shall get in by Michael's mass. 'Twas with some pain we were evuls'd from Colebrook. You may find some of our flesh sticking to the door posts. To change habitations is to die to them, and in my time I have died seven deaths. But I don't know whether every such change does not bring with it a rejuvenescence. 'Tis an enterprise, and shoves back the sense of death's approximating, which tho' not terrible to me, is at all times particular distasteful. My house-deaths have generally been periodical, recurring after seven years, but this last is premature by half that time. Cut off in the flower of Colebrook. The Middletonian stream and all its echoes mourn. Even minnows dwindle. *A parvis fiunt MINIMI*. I fear to invite Mrs. Hood to our new mansion, lest she envy it and rote us. But when we are fairly in, I hope she will come and try it. I heard she and you were made uncomfortable by some unworthy to be cared for attacks, and have tried to set up a feeble counter-action through the Table Book of last Saturday. Has it not reach'd you, that you are silent about it? Our new domicile is no manor house, but new, and externally

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not inviting, but furnish'd within with every convenience. Capital new locks to every door, capital grates in every room, with nothing to pay for incoming and the rent L10 less than the Islington one. It was built a few years since at L1,100 expense, they tell me, and I perfectly believe it. And I get it for L35 exclusive of moderate taxes. We think ourselves most lucky. It is not our intention to abandon Regent Street, and West End perambulations (monastic and terrible thought!) but occasionally to breathe the FRESHER AIR of the metropolis. We shall put up a bedroom or two (all we want) for occasional ex-rustication, where we shall visit, not be visited. Plays too we'll see—perhaps our own. Urbani Sylvani, and Sylvan Urbanuses in turns. Courtiers for a spurt, then philosophers. Old homely tell-truths and learn-truths in the virtuous shades of Enfield. Liars again and mocking gibbers in the coffee-houses and resorts of London. What can a mortal desire more for his bi-parted nature? O the curds and cream you shall eat with us here!

O the turtle soup and lobster sallads we shall devour with you there!

O the old books we shall peruse here!

O the new nonsense we shall trifle with over there!

O Sir T. Browne!—here.

O Mr. Hood and Mr. Jerdan there! thine, C(urbanus) L(sylvanus)

(ELIA ambo)—Inclos'd are verses which Emma sat down to write, her first, on the eve after your departure. Of course they are only for Mrs. H.'s perusal. They will shew you at least that one of our party is not willing to cut old friends. What to call 'em I don't know. Blank verse they are not, because of the rhymes.—Rhymes they are not, because of the blank verse. Heroics they are not, because they are lyric, lyric they are not, because of the Heroic measure. They must be called EMMAICS.—

\* \* \* \* \*

The full charm of the long early letters, with their pleasant expatiations on literary themes can scarcely be sampled without doing violence. The various editions in which the letters are obtainable will be found referred to in the bibliographical list at the end of this little book. In illustration of their continued appreciation it may be mentioned that three editions have been published during the past year or so, each of which contains letters denied to the others. The latest edition—that of Mr. E. V. Lucas—is also the fullest, both in the number of letters included and in the elaboration of its annotatory matter.

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[Illustration: Holograph letter to John Clare, "the Peasant Poet." Reduced facsimile from the original in the British Museum.]

[Transcript of the Handwritten Letter To John Clare.]

India house 31 Aug 1822



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Dear Clare, I thank you heartily for your present. I am an inveterate old Londoner, but while I am among your choice collections, I seem to be native to them, and free of the country. The quantity of your observation has astonished me. What have most pleased me have been Recollections after a Ramble, and those Grongar Hill kind of pieces in eight syllable lines, my favourite measure, such as Cowper Hill and Solitude. In some of your story telling Ballads the provincial phrases sometimes startle me. I think you are too profuse with them. In poetry slang [underlined] of every kind is to be avoided. There is a rustick Cockneyism as little pleasing as ours of London. Transplant Arcadia to Helpstone. The true rustic style, the Arcadian English, I think is to be found in Shenstones. Would his Schoolmistress, the prettiest of poems, have been better, if he had used quite the Goody's own language? Now and then a home rusticism is fresh & startling, but where nothing is gained in expression, it is out of tenor. It may make people [~~crossed out~~] folks smile and stare, but the ungenial coalition of barbarous with refined phrases will prevent you in the end from being so generally tasted, as you deserve to be. Excuse my freedom, and take the same liberty with my puns [underlined]. I send you two little volumes of my spare hours. They are of all sorts, there is a methodist hymn for Sundays, and a farce for Saturday night. Pray give them a place on your shelf. Pray accept a little volume, of which I have duplicate, that I may return in an equal number to your welcome presents—

I think I am indebted to you for a sonnet in the London for August.

Since I saw you I have been in France, and have eaten frogs. The nicest little rabbit things you ever tasted. Do look about for them. Make Mrs. Clare pick off the hind quarters, boil them plain, with parsley and butter. The four [~~crossed out~~] fore quarters are not so good. She may let them hop off by themselves. Yours sincerely, Cha<sup>s</sup> Lamb.

## THE ESSAYS OF ELIA

“Shakespeare himself might have read them and Hamlet have acted them; for truly was our excellent friend of the genuine line of Yorick.” Thus it was that Leigh Hunt referred to the essays which without doubt stand as the most characteristic of Charles Lamb's contributions to literature. His reputation, as was recognized and acknowledged within a few years of his death, “will ultimately rest on the Essays of Elia, than which our literature rejoices in few things finer.”



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The intimate footing upon which he puts himself and his reader, is perhaps not so much a peculiarity of his own as it is the dominant note always in the work of your born essayist. He discourses high truth or fresh philosophy, truest poetry, richest wit, or the most delicate humour, he presents personal experiences with that simplicity of pure camaraderie which assumes that the reader could do the same—if he had the mind, as Lamb himself put it when wittily snubbing Wordsworth. In most books, as De Quincey has pointed out, the author figures as a mere abstraction, “without sex or age or local station,” whom the reader banishes from his thoughts, but in the case of Lamb and that brilliant line of authors to which he belongs, we must know something of the man himself, and as I have said earlier, we get it abundantly scattered up and down his writings. Even if we do not happen to be acquainted with the actual biography, we can build up in our minds on reading the essays of Elia a life story not far removed from actuality, though it would be wanting in any hint of tragedy. It is this intimacy which at once attracts and repels readers, attracts all those who are, in however small a degree, kindred spirits, and repels, perhaps, others. The quaintness, oddity, flippancy, are wrought together with deep thought, poetry, and feeling to a wonderful degree. The very diversity of theme and manner—this varying change from grave to gay, from lively to severe—is indeed but a reflection of life itself, which with the most fortunate of us dashes our smiles with tears, and even to the most unfortunate imparts something of pleasure and delight.

The “Essays of Elia” may fittingly be dealt with as at once the most representative and the finest of his writings. Great as is the range of their subjects, it will be found that they are more or less unified by the author’s individuality both in point of view and in treatment, that they are all informed with what has been termed Lamb’s calm and self-reposing spirit, that they are all more or less strongly marked by that style which, based upon a loving study of the Elizabethan and seventeenth-century writers, was yet for the most part distinguished by concision and ease. He took from his models their richness of language without their prolixity, their felicity of expression without their tendency to the elaboration of conceits; he unconsciously employed their varied styles, to form an individual style of his own.

It is only possible in one small section of a small volume such as this to indicate a portion of the wealth in the Elia series, so varied are the themes which inspired the essayist: the delicious drollery of the “Dissertation upon Roast Pig”; the immortal characterization of “Mrs. Battle’s Opinions upon Whist”; the pleasant personal touches in a score of the essays; the cry of stifled affection in “Dream Children”; the whimsicality of “Popular Fallacies”; each of these, and as many again unspecified might be made the subject



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of separate comment. Indeed, for variety in unity there are few books to compare with our Elia. In the opening essay—the first of the series to appear in the “London Magazine,” the one to stand in the forefront of the volume—Lamb blends reminiscences with fancy, as he continued to do frequently throughout the series, in a way that is as suggestive to the seeker after autobiographical data as it is engaging to the reader in search of nothing further than the rich delight which comes of passing time with a literary gem. Lamb pictures “The South Sea House” as it was when he knew it thirty years earlier—he speaks of it as forty years. There is a presentation of the old place, fallen more or less completely upon days of desuetude, with some wonderfully-limned portraits of the officials. Here is the deputy-cashier, Thomas Tame:

He had the air and stoop of a nobleman. You would have taken him for one, had you met him in one of the passages leading to Westminster Hall. By stoop, I mean that gentle bending of the body forwards, which, in great men, must be supposed to be the effect of an habitual condescending attention to the applications of their inferiors. While he held you in converse, you felt strained to the height in the colloquy. The conference over, you were at leisure to smile at the comparative insignificance of the pretensions which had just awed you. His intellect was of the shallowest order. It did not reach to a saw or a proverb. His mind was in its original state of white paper. A sucking babe might have posed him. What was it then? Was he rich! Alas, no! Thomas Tame was very poor. Both he and his wife looked outwardly gentle folks, when I fear all was not well at all times within. She had a neat meagre person, which it was evident she had not sinned in over-pampering; but in its veins was noble blood. She traced her descent, by some labyrinth of relationship, which I never thoroughly understood—much less can explain with any heraldic certainty at this time of day—to the illustrious but unfortunate house of Derwentwater. This was the secret of Thomas’s stoop. This was the thought, the sentiment, the bright solitary star of your lives, ye mild and happy pair, which cheered you in the night of intellect, and in the obscurity of your station! This was to you instead of riches, instead of rank, instead of glittering attainments, and it was worth them all together. You insulted none with it; but, while you wore it as a piece of defensive armour only, no insult likewise could reach you through it. *Decus et solamen.*

Then at the close Elia says, “Reader, what if I have been playing with thee all this while—peradventure the very names, which I have summoned up before thee, are fantastic—insubstantial—like Henry Pimpernel and old John Naps of Greece; be satisfied that something answering to them has had a being. Their importance is from the past.” The names may have been mostly fantastic—in



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one case we know that it was not, for “Henry Man, the wit, the polished man of letters” is known to delvers among dead books—the types are immortal. In this first essay we find in such sentences as “their sums in triple columniations, set down with formal superfluity of cyphers,” an illustration of Lamb’s wonderful use of what an antipathetic critic might term an informal superfluity of syllables.

The next essay, reflecting the atmosphere of “Oxford in the Vacation,” was written presumably during a holiday visit to the University of Cambridge, though Elia touching upon matters concerning church holidays breaks off with—

... but I am wading out of my depths. I am not the man to decide the limits of civil and ecclesiastical authority—I am plain Elia—no Selden, nor Archbishop Usher—though at present in the thick of their books here in the heart of learning, under the shadow of mighty Bodley.

Then follows a passage eminently characteristic of Elia’s happy manner of playing with a theme:

I can here play the gentleman, enact the student To such a one as myself, who has been defrauded in his young years of the sweet food of academic institution, nowhere is so pleasant to while away a few idle weeks at one or other of the universities. Their vacation, too, at this time of the year, falls in pat with *ours*. Here I can take my walks unmolested, and fancy myself of what degree of standing I please. I seem admitted *ad eundem*. I fetch up past opportunities. I can rise at the chapel-bell, and dream that it rings for *me*. In moods of humility I can be a Sizar, or a Servitor. When the peacock vein rises, I strut a Gentleman Commoner. In graver moments, I proceed Master of Arts. Indeed I do not think I am much unlike that respectable character. I have seen your dim-eyed vergers, and bed-makers in spectacles drop a bow or curtesy as I pass, wisely mistaking me for something of the sort. I go about in black, which favours the notion. Only in Christ Church reverend quadrangle I can be content to pass for nothing short of a Seraphic doctor. The walks at these times are so much one’s own—the tall trees of Christ’s, the groves of Magdalen! The halls deserted, and with open doors inviting one to slip in unperceived, and pay a devoir to some Founder or noble or royal Benefactress (that should have been ours), whose portrait seems to smile upon their over-looked beadsman, and to adopt me for their own. Then, to take a peep in by the way at the butteries, and sculleries, redolent of antique hospitality: the immense caves of kitchens, kitchen fire-places, cordial recesses; ovens whose first pies were baked four centuries ago; and spits which have cooked for Chaucer! Not the meanest minister among the dishes but is hallowed to me through his imagination, and the Cook goes forth a Manciple.

The next essay, “Christ’s Hospital Five



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and Thirty Years Ago,” should be read along with an earlier one, which does not belong actually to the Elia series, “Recollections of Christ’s Hospital.” In the later essay Lamb affected to look at the school as it might have been to a scholar less fortunately circumstanced than himself, a boy far from his family and friends, and the boy whom he selected was that one of his school companions whom he knew best and with whom in manhood he had sustained the closest friendship—S. T. Coleridge. That friend he thus apostrophizes in a passage which has frequently been quoted:

Come back into memory, like as thou wert in the day-spring of thy fancies, with hope like a fiery column before thee—the dark pillar not yet turned—Samuel Taylor Coleridge—Logician, Metaphysician, Bard! How have I seen the casual passer through the Cloisters stand still, entranced with admiration (while he weighed the disproportion between the *speech* and the *garb* of the young Mirandula), to hear thee unfold, in thy deep and sweet intonations, the mysteries of Jamblichus or Plotinus (for even in those years thou waxedst not pale at such philosophic draughts), or reciting Homer in his Greek, or Pindar, while the walls of the old Grey Friars re-echoed to the accents of the inspired charity-boy!

“The Two Races of Men,” divides men into those who borrow and those who lend, the theme being followed out with great humour, and going on to those “whose treasures are rather cased in leather covers than closed in iron coffers,” and then giving pleasant bits about Coleridge—under his *nomme de guerre* of Comberbatch—and his theory that “the title to property in a book ... is in exact ratio to the claimant’s powers of understanding and appreciating the same.” “Should he go on acting upon this theory,” adds Elia, “which of our shelves is safe?”

“New Year’s Eve” suggests a train of reflections—not, in the platitudinous manner of looking back over the errors of the past year and making good resolutions for the coming one—but on mortality generally, and on the passing of time and the passing of life:

I am not content to pass away like a weaver’s shuttle! These metaphors solace me not, nor sweeten the unpalatable draught of mortality. I care not to be carried with the tide, that smoothly bears human life to eternity; and reluct at the inevitable course of destiny. I am in love with this green earth; the face of town and country; the unspeakable rural solitude, and the sweet security of streets. I would set up my tabernacle here. I am content to stand still at the age to which I am arrived; I and my friends; to be no younger, no richer, no handsomer. I do not want to be weaned by age; or drop like mellow fruit, as they say, into the grave.

Next comes the immortal “Mrs. Battle’s Opinions on Whist,”—Mrs. Battle, whose wish for “a clear fire, a clean hearth, and the rigour of the game” has become almost



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proverbial so commonly is it repeated, whose heart-whole devotion to her game will make true Elians whist players when bridge is forgotten. In “A Chapter on Ears,” Elia expatiates upon his insensibility to music; in “All Fool’s Day” he puts wisdom under motley in a truly Shakespearian fashion, with the fine conclusion, “and take my word for this, reader, and say a fool told it you, if you please, that he who hath not a dram of folly in his mixture, hath pounds of much worse matter in his composition.”

“The Quakers’ Meeting” is a delicate and impressive verbal representation of the spirit of Quakerdom as revealed to one not a Quaker but ready to appreciate the quietist spirit. Those who have never attended a meeting of the kind feel that they have realized its significance when they come across a passage such as this:

More frequently the meeting is broken up without a word having been spoken. But the mind has been fed. You go away with a sermon, not made with hands. You have been in the milder caverns of Trophonius; or as in some den, where that fiercest and savagest of all wild creatures, the Tongue, that unruly member, has strangely lain tied up and captive. You have bathed with stillness—O, when the spirit is sore fettered, even tired to sickness of the janglings and nonsense noises of the world, what a balm and a solace it is, to go and seat yourself for a quiet half hour, upon some undisputed corner of a bench, among the gentle Quakers!

Then follows a quaint Elian touch of humour in the application of a line of Wordsworth’s far from that poet’s intention: “Their garb and stillness conjoined, present an uniformity, tranquil and herd-like—as in the pasture—’forty feeding like one.”

An encounter in a coach with a loquacious gentleman whom he took to be a school-master set Lamb musing on the differences between “The Old and the New School-Master,” on the way in which the pedagogue is differentiated by the very conditions of his labours not only from his boys but from his fellows generally; he is a man for whom life is in a measure poisoned, “nothing comes to him not spoiled by the sophisticating medium of moral uses.” Incidentally too, Elia informs us that the school-master

is so used to teaching that he wants to be teaching you. One of these professors, upon my complaining that these little sketches of mine were anything but methodical, and that I was unable to make them otherwise, kindly offered to instruct me in the method by which young gentlemen in his seminary were taught to compose English themes. The jests of a school-master are coarse or thin.

The next essay—the only one in “The Essays of Elia” volume which had not appeared in the “London Magazine”—is a pretty bit about “Valentine’s Day.” This is followed by an inquiry into the existence of “Imperfect Sympathies,” the writer declaring that he had been trying all his life—without success—to like Scotsmen, and that he had the same



imperfect sympathy with Jews. The Scotsmen are too precise, too matter of fact at once in their own statements and those to which alone they will attend. This would of itself be sufficient to establish the "imperfect sympathy," for in another connection Lamb had declared his preference for "a matter of lie man."



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“Witches and Other Night Fears” is an examination, in which whimsicality is blent with deep seriousness, of the night terrors of imaginative childhood; Elia showed how a picture in an old time Bible history had shaped his fears and made his nights hideous for several years of his early childhood, though he holds that “It is not book, or picture, or the stories of foolish servants, which create these terrors in children. They can at most but give them direction.” He suggests that the kind of fear is purely spiritual, and incidentally gives a characteristically quaint turn in “My night-fancies have long ceased to be afflictive. I confess an occasional nightmare; but I do not, as in early youth, keep a stud of them.”

In “My Relations” we have an excellent instance of Lamb’s veiled autobiography; he begins by saying that he has no brother or sister and at once proceeds to a close and analytical portrait of his “cousin,” James Elia, that supposed personage being Charles Lamb’s own brother John, who died in November, 1821, a few months after the original appearance of this essay. “Mackery End in Hertfordshire,” continues the theme of relations with another striking piece of portraiture in another supposed cousin of Elia’s, Bridget (really Mary Lamb). In limning his sister he was of course hampered somewhat by her terrible affliction, but wonderfully has he surmounted it, and delightful indeed it is to follow the narrative of the “cousins” visit to unknown cousins at the old place in “the green plains of pleasant Hertfordshire.”

Dealing with the subject of “Modern Gallantry” Elia shows how it is wanting in the true spirit of gallantry which should consist not in compliments to youth and beauty but in reverence to sex.

“The Old Benchers of the Inner Temple” is one of the essays richest at once in personal recollections, in wonderful portraiture, and in those subtle literary touches which impart their peculiar flavour to the whole. A sketch of the author’s father as Lovel was quoted from this essay in the opening chapter. Elia’s observation, his felicity of expression, his originality of thought, a hint of his playfulness, may all be recognized in the very commencement of this delicious essay:

I was born, and passed the first seven years of my life in the Temple. Its church, its halls, its gardens, its fountain, its river, I had almost said—for in those young years, what was this king of rivers to me but a stream that watered our pleasant places?—these are my oldest recollections. I repeat, to this day, no verses to myself more frequently, or with kindlier emotion, than those of Spenser, where he speaks of this spot:

“There when they came, whereas those bricky towers,  
The which on Themmes brode aged back doth ride,  
Where now the studious lawyers have their bowers,  
There whylome wont the Templar knights to bide,  
Till they decayd through pride.”



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Indeed, it is the most elegant spot in the metropolis. What a transition for a countryman visiting London for the first time—the passing from the crowded Strand or Fleet Street, by unexpected avenues, into its magnificent ample squares, its classic green recesses! what a cheerful, liberal look hath that portion of it, which, from three sides, overlooks the greater garden, that goodly pile

“Of building strong, albeit of Paper hight,”

confronting, with massy contrast, the lighter, older, more fantastically shrouded one named of Harcourt, with the cheerful Crown Office Row (place of my kindly engendure) right opposite the stately stream, which washes the garden-foot with her yet scarcely trade-polluted waters, and seems but just weaned from her Twickenham Naiades! a man would give something to have been born in such places. What a collegiate aspect has that fine Elizabethan hall, where the fountain plays, which I have made to rise and fall, how many times! to the astoundment of the young urchins, my contemporaries, who, not being able to guess at its recondite machinery, were almost tempted to hail the wondrous work as magic! What an antique air had the now almost effaced sun-dials with their moral inscriptions, seeming co-evals with that Time which they measured, and to take their revelations of its flight immediately from heaven, holding correspondence with the fountain of light! How would the dark line steal imperceptibly on, watched by the eye of childhood, eager to detect its movement, never caught, nice as an evanescent cloud, or the first arrests of sleep!

“Ah! yet doth beauty like a dial-hand  
Steal from his figure, and no pace perceived!”

What a dead thing is a clock, with its ponderous embowelments of lead and brass, its pert or solemn dullness of communication, compared with the simple altar-like structure and silent heart-language of the old dial! It stood as the garden god of Christian gardens. Why is it almost everywhere vanished?

In this essay, too, we have a happy sentence where, noting an error into which his memory had betrayed him, Elia wrote of his own narratives: “They are, in truth, but shadows of fact—verisimilitudes, not verities—or sitting but upon the remote edges and outskirts of history.”

Dealing with “Grace Before Meat” Elia takes up an unconventional position and defends it with spirit. It is something of an impertinence to offer up thanks before an orgy of superfluous luxuries, a “grace” is only fitting for a poor man sitting down before the necessaries for which he may well feel thankful. Even such a theme Lamb finds a fruitful occasion for pertinent literary illustration and criticism, contrasting—from Milton’s “Paradise Lost”—the feast proffered by the Tempter to Christ in the wilderness with “the temperate dreams of the divine Hungerer.”



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With “My First Play” Elia returned to one of those autobiographic themes in which he is so often at his happiest. He represents the emotions of the child of six or seven at the theatre and contrasts them with those that follow when the child has reached his teens. “At school all play-going was inhibited.” He concludes, and, most readers will agree, concludes with justice, that “we differ from ourselves less at sixty and sixteen, than the latter does from six.”

“Dream Children,” again, has much in it of the story of the writer’s childhood, blent with sorrow over his brother’s recent death and interwoven with a fanciful imagining of what might have been. Elia pictures himself talking to his two children of his own childhood’s days when visiting grandmother Field:

When suddenly, turning to Alice, the soul of the first Alice looked out at her eyes with such a reality of re-presentment, that I became in doubt which of them stood there before me, or whose that bright hair was; and while I stood gazing, both the children gradually grew fainter to my view, receding, and still receding till nothing at last but two mournful features were seen in the uttermost distance, which, without speech, strangely impressed upon me the effects of speech: “We are not of Alice, nor of thee, nor are we children at all. The children of Alice call Bartrum father. We are nothing, less than nothing, and dreams. We are only what might have been, and must wait upon the tedious shores of Lethe millions of ages before we have existence, and a name”—and immediately awaking, I found myself quietly seated in my bachelor arm-chair, where I had fallen asleep, with the faithful Bridget unchanged by my side—but John L. (or James Elia) was gone for ever.

This little essay, the most beautiful of the series, is as essentially pathetic as anything in our literature, bringing tears to the eyes at every reading though known almost by heart.

The essay on “Distant Correspondents,” in the form of a playful epistle to a friend, B. F. (*i.e.*, Barron Field, also a contributor to the “London Magazine”) has much that is characteristic of the writer. In it he plays—as he does in other letters to distant friends—on the way in which “this confusion of tenses, this grand solecism of two presents” renders writing difficult; in it he airs his fondness for a pun and enlarges upon the fugacity of that form of fun, its inherent incapacity for travel; and in it, too, he gives some indication—we have several such indications in his letters—of his fondness for hoaxing his friends with invented news about other friends, or with questions on supposititious problems set forth as actualities.



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The next essay, “The Praise of Chimney-Sweepers,” might be cited as one of those most fully representing the characteristics of Lamb’s work as essayist. It has its touches of personal reminiscences, it deals with an out-of-the-way subject in a surprisingly engaging manner, and it is full of those quaint turns of expression, those more or less recondite words which Elia re-introduced from the older writers, Jeremy Taylor, Sir Thomas Browne, *etc.*, as he had re-introduced the dramatic writings of the seventeenth century. Here is a passage which may be said to be thoroughly representative at once of Elia’s manner of looking at things, as well as his own manner of describing them. Elia is discussing “Saloop.”

I know not by what particular conformation of the organ it happens, but I have always found that this composition is surprisingly gratifying to the palate of a young chimney-sweeper—whether the oily particles (sassafras is slightly oleaginous) do attenuate and soften the fuliginous concretions, which are sometimes found (in dissections) to adhere to the roof of the mouth in these unfledged practitioners; or whether Nature, sensible that she had mingled too much of bitter wood in the lot of these raw victims, caused to grow out of the earth her sassafras for a sweet lenitive; but so it is, that no possible taste or odour to the senses of a young chimney-sweeper can convey a delicate excitement comparable to this mixture. Being penniless, they will yet hang their black heads over the ascending steam, to gratify one sense if possible, seemingly no less pleased than those domestic animals—cats—when they purr over a new-found sprig of valerian. There is something more in these sympathies than philosophy can inculcate.

In this essay also we have an example—one of how many!—of Lamb’s happiness in hitting upon an illustration, even though it be of the ludicrous; mentioning the wonderful white of the sweep-boy’s teeth he adds, “It is, as when

’A sable cloud  
Turns forth her silver lining on the night.’”

“A Dissertation upon Roast Pig” is perhaps the most widely known of all the essays of Elia. Its delightful drollery, its very revelling in the daintiness of sucking-pig, its wonderfully rich literary presentation, its deliberate acceptance of wild improbability as historic basis, all unite to give it special place in the regard of readers. The theme is of course familiar. It is that of a small Chinese boy playing with fire who burnt down his father’s flimsy hut so that a whole litter of piglings was roasted in the conflagration. The boy touched one of the incinerated little ones to feel if it were alive; burnt his fingers and applied them to his mouth. His father returned and did the same, and thus roast sucking-pig became a new dish. Lamb plays with his subject with an inimitable mock earnestness.



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Our ancestors were nice in their method of sacrificing these tender victims. We read of pigs whipt to death with something of a shock, as we hear of any other obsolete custom. The age of discipline is gone by, or it would be curious to inquire (in a philosophical light merely) what effect this process might have towards intenerating and dulcifying a substance, naturally so mild and dulcet as the flesh of young pigs. It looks like refining a violet. Yet we should be cautious, while we condemn the inhumanity, how we censure the wisdom of the practice. It might impart a gusto.

The subject Charles Lamb professed to take from a Chinese manuscript of his friend Manning's, and there have not been wanting critics who have sought for literary germs from which this essay might have sprung. Such will find in the seventeenth-century "Letters writ by a Turkish Spy" the origin of roasted meat referred to the days of sacrifice when one of the priests touching a burning beast hurt his fingers and applied them to his mouth—with precisely the same sequel which followed on Bo-bo's escapade.

"A Bachelor's Complaint of the Behaviour of Married People" is a delicate—perhaps partly ironical—description of a bachelor's objections to his married friends flaunting their happiness in his face. In the last three of the essays we have Lamb as critic of the stage—partly, as in the Dramatic Specimens, of its literature, "On the Artificial Comedy of the Last Century," and partly on its actors, "On some of the Old Actors" and "On the Acting of Munden." Here again we have proofs of his instinctive critical power, his finely perfected method of expressing his appreciation of men and books.

The "Last Essays of Elia," published the year before Lamb's death, open with a "Character of the late Elia"—an admirable piece of self-portraiture in which Lamb hit off with great felicity some of his own characteristics, physical and intellectual. In the first of the essays, "Blakesmoor in H—shire," the author let his memory and fancy play about the old house, lately razed, in which his grandmother Field had held sway as housekeeper, in which as child he had passed many happy holidays. Its tapestries, its haunted room, its "tattered and diminished 'Scutcheon," its Justice Hall, its "costly fruit garden, with its sun-baked southern wall," its "noble Marble Hall, with its Mosaic pavements, and its Twelve Caesars—stately busts in marble—ranged round," each of these recalled by memory suggests some deep thought or some pleasant turn. The opening passage at once sets the note of the whole, and may be taken as a representation of Lamb's contemplative mood:

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I do not know a pleasure more affecting than to range at will over the deserted apartments of some fine old family mansion. The traces of extinct grandeur admit of a better passion than envy; and contemplations on the great and good, whom we fancy in succession to have been its inhabitants, weave for us illusions, incompatible with the bustle of modern occupancy, and vanities of foolish present aristocracy. The same difference of feeling, I think, attends us between entering an empty and a crowded church. In the latter it is chance but some present human frailty—an act of inattention on the part of some of the auditory—or a trait of affectation, or worse, vain-glory on that of the preacher—puts us by our best thoughts, disharmonizing the place and the occasion. But wouldst thou know the beauty of holiness? go alone on some week-day, borrowing the keys of good Master Sexton, traverse the cool aisles of some country church: think of the piety that has kneeled there—the congregations, old and young, that have found consolation there—the meek pastor, the docile parishioner. With no disturbing emotions, no cross conflicting comparisons, drink in the tranquillity of the place, till thou thyself become as fixed and motionless as the marble effigies that kneel and weep around thee.

“Poor Relations” is a beautiful example of humour—provoking to smiles while touching to tears—with a wonderful introductory piling up of definitions: “A Poor Relation—is the most irrelevant thing in nature,—a piece of impertinent correspondency,—a preposterous shadow, lengthening in the noontide of your prosperity,—an unwelcome remembrancer,” and so on. “This theme of poor relations is replete with so much matter for tragic as well as comic associations that it is difficult to keep the account distinct without blending.” The essay includes three or four admirable examples of Elia’s felicity in drawing typical characters with just that touch of oddity that makes them live as individuals. The theatre which we have seen always made its triple appeal to Lamb—from the study, from the front, and from the boards—inspired the next three essays, “Stage Illusions,” “To the Shade of Elliston,” and “Ellistoniana.” The first is an example of subtle criticism showing how it is that we get enjoyment out of unlovely attributes on the stage, thanks to the “exquisite art of the actor in a perpetual sub-insinuation to us,” that things are not altogether what they seem to be. In the two essays on Elliston we have at once an eloquent tribute to a stage-magnate of his day and a fine character portrait.

“Detached Thoughts on Books and Reading,” might be cited as one of the most characteristic of the essays of Elia. It illustrates the writer’s happiest style, and indicates his taste. In its opening passages are words and phrases which have become quotations “familiar in the mouth as household words” to all book-lovers. Lamb takes as his text a remark made by Lord Foppington in Vanbrugh’s “Relapse”: “To mind the inside of a book is to entertain one’s self with the forced products of another man’s brain. Now I think a man of quality and breeding may be much amused with the natural sprouts of his own.”



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An ingenious acquaintance was so much struck with this bright sally of his Lordship, that he has left off reading altogether, to the great improvement of his originality. At the hazard of losing some credit on this head, I must confess that I dedicate no inconsiderable portion of my time to other people's thoughts. I dream away my life in others' speculations. I love to lose myself in other men's minds. When I am not walking, I am reading; I cannot sit and think. Books think for me. I have no repugnances. Shaftesbury is not too genteel for me, nor Jonathan Wild too low. I can read anything which I call a *book*. There are things in that shape which I cannot allow for such. In this catalogue of *books which are no books—biblia a-biblia*—I reckon Court Calendars, Directories, Pocket Books, Draught Boards, bound and lettered on the back, Scientific Treatises, Almanacks, Statutes at Large; the works of Hume, Gibbon, Robertson, Beattie, Soame Jenyns, and, generally, all those volumes which "no gentleman's library should be without"; the Histories of Flavius Josephus (that learned Jew), and Paley's "Moral Philosophy." With these exceptions, I can read almost anything. I bless my stars for a taste so catholic, so unexcluding. I confess that it moves my spleen to see these *things in books' clothing* perched upon shelves, like false saints, usurpers of true shrines, intruders into the sanctuary, thrusting out the legitimate occupants. To reach down a well-bound semblance of a volume, and hope it some kind-hearted playbook; then, opening what "seem its leaves," to come bolt upon a withering Population Essay. To expect a Steele, or a Farquhar, and find—Adam Smith; to view a well-arranged assortment of block-headed Encyclopaedias (Anglicanas or Metropolitanas) set out in an array of Russia, or Morocco, when a tithe of that good leather would comfortably re-clothe my shivering folios; would renovate Paracelsus himself, and enable old Raymund Lully to look himself again in the world. I never see these impostors, but I long to strip them to warm my ragged veterans in their spoils.

He passes on to a consideration of the fitting habiliments of books; the sizes which appealed to him; the where and when to read: "I should not care to be caught in the serious avenues of some cathedral alone and reading 'Candide'!"—"The Old Margate Hoy" gives reminiscences of a visit to the popular resort—with some uncomplimentary asides at Hastings—in the days of the boy, "ill-exchanged for the foppery and freshwater niceness of the modern steampacket," the boy that asked "no aid of magic fumes, and spells, and boiling cauldrons." "The Convalescent" expatiates upon the allowable egoism of the occupant of a sick bed, upon his "regal solitude," and goes on to show "how convalescence shrinks a man back to his primitive state." The essay was inspired by that ill-health which led to Lamb's retirement from the India House in 1825. At the close he indulged his pen in his conversational fondness for a pun:



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In this flat swamp of convalescence, left by the ebb of sickness, yet far enough removed from the terra firma of established health, your note, dear Editor, reached me, requesting—an article. *In articulo mortis*, thought I; but it is something hard—and the quibble, wretched as it was, relieved me.

In the “Sanity of True Genius” Elia set out to controvert the idea expressed by Dryden in his best remembered line—

“Great wits to madness nearly are allied,”

and does so in a most convincing manner if, with him, we understand by the greatness of wit poetic talent. As he says: “It is impossible for the mind to conceive of a mad Shakespeare.”

The ground of the mistake is, that men, finding in the raptures of the higher poetry a condition of exaltation, to which they have no parallel in their own experience, besides the spurious resemblance of it in dreams and fevers, impute a state of dreaminess and fever to the poet. But the true poet dreams being awake. He is not possessed by his subject but has dominion over it. In the groves of Eden he walks familiar as in his native paths. He ascends the empyrean heaven, and is not intoxicated. He treads the burning marl without dismay; he wins his flight without self-loss through realms of chaos “and old night.” Or if, abandoning himself to that severer chaos of a “human mind untuned,” he is content awhile to be mad with Lear, or to hate mankind (a sort of madness) with Timon; neither is that madness, nor this misanthropy, so unchecked, but that—never letting the reins of reason wholly go, while most he seems to do so—he has his better genius whispering at his ear, with the good servant Kent suggesting saner counsels; or with the honest steward Flavius recommending kindlier resolutions. Where he seems most to recede from humanity, he will be found the truest to it.

“Captain Jackson” is an unforgettable picture of a poor man who would *not* be poor; his manners made a plated spoon appear as silver sugar-tongs, a homely bench a sofa, and so on. As Elia concludes:

There is some merit in putting a handsome face upon indigent circumstances. To bully and swagger away the sense of them before strangers, may not always be discommendable. Tibbs and Bobadil, even when detected, have more of our admiration than contempt. But for a man to put the cheat upon himself; to play the Bobadil at home; and, steeped in poverty up to the lips, to fancy himself all the while chin-deep in riches, is a strain of constitutional philosophy, and a mastery over fortune, which was reserved for my old friend Captain Jackson.

With the next essay of this collection, that on “The Superannuated Man,” we come to one of the most notable of the series of Elia’s transmutations of matters of private experience into precious literature. The paper is as autobiographic as any of his



letters: some slight changes—as of the East India House to the name of a city firm—are made, but for the rest it is a record of his retirement with a revelation of the feelings attendant upon the change from having to go daily to an office for thirty-six years to being suddenly free:



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For the first day or two I felt stunned, overwhelmed. I could only apprehend my felicity; I was too confused to taste it sincerely. I wandered about, thinking I was happy and knowing that I was not. I was in the condition of a prisoner in the old Bastile, suddenly let loose after a forty years' confinement. I could scarce trust myself with myself. It was like passing out of Time into Eternity—for it is a sort of Eternity for a man to have all his Time to himself. It seemed to me that I had more time on my hands than I could ever manage. From a poor man, poor in Time, I was suddenly lifted up into a vast revenue; I could see no end of my possessions; I wanted some steward, or judicious bailiff, to manage my estates in Time for me. And here let me caution persons grown old in active business, not lightly, nor without weighing their own resources, to forego their customary employment all at once, for there may be danger in it. I feel it by myself, but I know that my resources are sufficient; and now that those first giddy raptures have subsided, I have a quiet home-feeling of the blessedness of my condition. I am in no hurry. Having all holidays, I am as though I had none. If Time hung heavy upon me I could walk it away; but I do not walk all day long, as I used to do in those old transient holidays, thirty miles a day, to make the most of them. If Time were troublesome, I could read it away, but I do not read in that violent measure, with which, having no Time my own but candlelight Time, I used to weary out my head and eyesight in bygone winters. I walk, read, or scribble (as now) just when the fit seizes me. I no longer hunt after pleasure; I let it come to me. I am like the man

“——that's born, and has his years come to him,  
In some green desert.”

“The Genteel Style in Writing” is a delightful enforcement of the “ordinary criticism” that “my Lord Shaftesbury, and Sir William Temple, are models of the genteel style in writing,” though Elia prefers to differentiate them as “the lordly and the gentlemanly.” The essay is, for the most part, a plea, with illustrations, for a consideration of Sir William Temple as an easy and engaging writer. “Barbara S——” is a slight anecdote expanded into a sympathetic little story of a child-actress who, instead of her half-guinea salary, being once handed a guinea in error, virtuously took it back and received the moiety.

“The Tombs in the Abbey” is an indignant protest—in the form of a letter to Southey—against the closing of Westminster Abbey and St. Paul's Cathedral, except during service times, to all but those who could afford to pay for admission; it closes with a touch of humour where Elia suggests that the Abbey had been closed because the statue of Major Andre had been disfigured, and adds: “The mischief was done about the time that you were a scholar there. Do you know anything about the unfortunate relic?” Then, in “Amicus Redivivus,” we have an accident to a friend, George Dyer, who had walked absent-mindedly into the New River opposite Lamb's very door, made to supply matter for treatment in Elia's pleasantest vein.



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“Some Sonnets of Sir Philip Sydney” gives a dozen of Sidney’s sonnets with appreciatory comment. “Newspapers Thirty Years Ago” is particularly interesting for its reminiscences of the days when Lamb wrote half a dozen daily jests for “The Morning Post” at sixpence per jest, and for its sketches of Daniel Stuart and Fenwick, two diversely typical journalists of a century since. “Barrenness of the Imaginative Faculty in the Productions of Modern Art” is a criticism of the prevailing taste in art matters, inspired by Martin’s “Belshazzar’s Feast,” and contrasts the modern methods of painting as—a Dryad, “a beautiful naked figure recumbent under wide-stretched oaks” (a figure that with a different background would do just as well as a Naiad), with the older method illustrated by Julio Romano’s dryad, in which was “an approximation of two natures.” “Rejoicings Upon the New Year’s Coming of Age” is a graceful, sparkling piece of humorous fancy:

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*, *Shrove Tuesday*, and a few such *Moveables*, who had lately shifted their quarters. Well, they all met at last, foul *Days*, fine *Days*, all sorts of *Days*, and a rare din they made of it. There was nothing but, 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, all white and gold, like a queen on a frost-cake—all royal, 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* came in, dripping; and sun-shiny *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 *Doomsday* sent word—he might be expected.

“The Wedding” describes such a ceremony at which Elia had assisted, and illustrates at once his sympathy with the young people and with their parents—“is there not something untender, to say no more of it, in the hurry which a beloved child is in to tear herself from the paternal stock and commit herself to strange graftings.” “The Child Angel” is a beautiful poetic apologue in the form of a dream.

In “Old China,” one of the most attractive of this varied series, Elia is ready with reminiscences of the days when the purchase of the books, pictures, or old china that they loved, meant a real sacrifice, and the things purchased were therefore the more deeply prized.



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Do you remember the brown suit, which you made to hang upon you, till all your friends cried shame upon you, it grew so threadbare—and all because of that folio Beaumont and Fletcher, which you dragged home late at night from Barker's in Covent Garden? Do you remember how we eyed it for weeks before we could make up our minds to the purchase, and had not come to a determination till it was near ten o'clock of the Saturday night, when you set off from Islington, fearing you should be too late—and when the old bookseller, with some grumbling, opened his shop, and by the twinkling taper (for he was setting bedwards) lighted out the relic from his dusty treasures—and when you lugged it home wishing it were twice as cumbersome—and when you presented it to me; and when we were exploring the perfectness of it (*collating* you called it)—and while I was repairing some of the loose leaves with paste, which your impatience would not suffer to be left till daybreak—was there no pleasure in being a poor man? or can those neat black clothes you wear now, and are so careful to keep brushed, since we have become rich and finical, give you half the honest vanity, with which you flaunted it about in that overworn suit—your old corbeau—for four or five weeks longer than you should have done, to pacify your conscience for the mighty sum of fifteen—or sixteen shillings, was it?—a great affair we thought it then—which you had lavished on the old folio. Now you can afford to buy any book that pleases you, but I do not see that you ever bring me home any nice old purchases now. When you came home with twenty apologies for laying out a less number of shillings upon that print after Lionardo, which we christened the “Lady Blanch”; when you looked at the purchase, and thought of the money,—and thought of the money, and looked again at the picture—was there no pleasure in being a poor man? Now, you have nothing to do but walk into Colnaghi's, and buy a wilderness of Lionardos. Yet do you?

“Confessions of a Drunkard” and “Popular Fallacies” complete the tale of the “Essays of Elia” that were collected into volume form as such. The first-named essay had been issued originally in 1813. It is an attempt to set forth from a drunkard's point of view the evils of drunkenness, and was first published in a periodical with a purpose over twenty years before its inclusion in the second edition of the “Last Essays of Elia.” To accentuate the fact that it was purely a literary performance—an attempt to project himself into the mind of a drunkard willing to allow others to profit by his example—Lamb reprinted it in the “London Magazine” as one of his ordinary contributions. There have not been wanting matter-of-fact people (with whom our Elia has recorded his imperfect sympathy) who have accepted this essay as pure biography; because details tally with the author's life they think the whole must do so. We have but to follow the story of Lamb's life with understanding to realize how wrong is this impression. The closing dozen of essays in brief, grouped under the title of “Popular Fallacies,” discuss certain familiar axioms and show them—in the light of fun and fancy—to be wholly fallacious.



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Such is the variety of those two volumes which by common consent—by popular appreciation and by critical judgement—have their place as Lamb's most characteristic work. Throughout both series we find delicate unconventionality, the same choice of subjects from among the simplest suggestions of everyday life, lifted by his method of treatment, his manner of looking at and treating things, out of the sphere of every day into that of all days. However simple may be the subject chosen it is always made peculiarly his own.

### HIS STYLE

The style is the man. The rule was thus confined within the compass of a brief sentence by a distinguished French naturalist, and if there be examples which form exceptions to that rule, Charles Lamb is certainly not one of them. Markedly individual himself he reveals that individuality in his writings so strongly that there are not wanting critics who consider themselves able to decide from the turn of a phrase or the use of a word whether Lamb did or did not write any particular piece of work which it may have been sought to father on him. In the manner of presentation of his writings we have at once the revelation of catholic literary taste and wide reading combined with the deep seriousness and the almost irresponsible whimsicality of the man himself. The man who was loved by all who knew him in the flesh—so true is it that *le style c'est l'homme*—reveals himself as a man to be loved by those who can only know him through the medium of the written word. Where he has given rein to his fancy or his imagination, he is humorous, whimsical, inventive; where he is dealing with matters of serious fact or criticism he is simple, clear, and to the point. Quotations already given would go to illustrate this, but two further contrasting passages may be added. The first is from "Table Talk," the second from a critical essay on the acting of Shakespeare's tragedies.

It is a desideratum in works that treat *de re culinaria*, that we have no rationale of sauces, or theory of mixed flavours; as to show why cabbage is reprehensible with roast beef, laudable with bacon; why the haunch of mutton seeks the alliance of currant jelly, the shoulder civilly declineth it; why a loin of veal (a pretty problem), being itself unctuous, seeketh the adventitious lubricity of melted butter; and why the same part in pork, not more oleaginous, abhorreth it; why the French bean sympathizes with the flesh of deer; why salt fish points to parsnip, brawn makes a dead set at mustard; why cats prefer valerian to heartsease, old ladies *vice versa*—though this is rather travelling out of the road of the dietetics, and may be thought a question more curious than relevant; why salmon (a strong sapor *per se*) fortifieth its condition with the mighty lobster sauce, whose embraces are fatal to the delicateser relish of the turbot; why oysters in death rise up against the contamination



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of brown sugar, while they are posthumously amorous of vinegar; why the sour mango and the sweet jam, by turns, court and are accepted by the compilable mutton hash—she not yet decidedly declaring for either. We are as yet but in the empirical stage of cookery.

\* \* \* \* \*

So to see Lear acted—to see an old man tottering about the stage with a walking-stick, turned out of doors by his daughters on a rainy night, has nothing in it but what is painful and disgusting. We want to take him into shelter and relieve him. That is all the feeling which the acting of Lear ever produced on me. But the Lear of Shakespeare cannot be acted. The contemptible machinery by which they mimic the storm which he goes out in, is not more inadequate to represent the horrors of the real elements, than any actor can be to represent Lear: they might more easily propose to personate the Satan of Milton upon a stage, or one of Michael Angelo's terrible figures. The greatness of Lear is not in corporal dimension but in intellectual: the explosions of his passions are terrible as a volcano; they are storms turning up and disclosing to the bottom that sea, his mind, with all its vast riches. It is his mind which is laid bare. This case of flesh and blood seems too insignificant to be thought on; even as he himself neglects it. On the stage we see nothing but corporal infirmities and weakness, the impotence of rage: while we read it, we see not Lear, but we are Lear—we are in his mind, we are sustained by a grandeur which baffles the malice of daughters and storms; in the aberrations of his reason, we discover a mighty irregular power of reasoning, immethodized from the ordinary purposes of life, but exerting its powers, as the wind bloweth where it listeth, at will upon the corruptions and abuses of mankind. What have looks or tones to do with that sublime identification of his age with that of the heavens themselves, when in his reproaches to them for conniving at the injustice of his children, he reminds them that “they themselves are old”? What gesture shall we appropriate to this? What has the voice or the eye to do with such things?

From the olden time  
Of Authorship thy Patent should be dated,  
And thou with Marvell, Browne, and Burton mated.

Thus did Bernard Barton, the Quaker poet, close a sonnet which he addressed to Elia, and there is keen criticism in the few words. With the three writers mentioned Lamb was in rarest sympathy; many are the references to them in his books and in his letters. With Andrew Marvell he shows his kinship in his verse, with the authors of “The Religio Medici” and of “The Anatomy of Melancholy,” in diverse ways in his prose. Now fanciful and euphemistic with these, he is, as soon as occasion calls for plainer statement, clear and simple in expression. As one critic has put it, he was so steeped in the literature

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of the past that it became natural for him to deal with a theme more or less in the manner in which that theme would have been dealt with by that writer in the past most likely to have made it his own. This is perhaps slightly exaggerated, but it has something of truth in it. "For with all his marked individuality of manner there are perhaps few English writers who have written so differently on different themes." Placing special emphasis on his favourites—which besides the three named included Jeremy Taylor, Chapman, and Wither, to say nothing of the whole body of the dramatists of our literary renaissance—it may be said that his wide reading, his loving study, among the authors of our richest literary periods went far towards forming his style, though it must be remembered—it cannot be forgotten with a volume of his essays or letters in hand—that there is always that marked but indescribable "individuality of manner" which pervades the varied whole.

Hazlitt, touching upon the characteristics of Charles Lamb, in the essay in which he—not very felicitously—brackets Elia and Geoffrey Crayon in the "Spirit of the Age," says:

He is borne along with no pompous paradoxes, shines in no glittering tinsel of a fashionable phraseology; is neither fop nor sophist. He has none of the turbulence or froth of new-fangled opinions. His style runs pure and clear, though it may often take an underground course, or be conveyed through old-fashioned conduit pipes. Mr. Lamb does not court popularity, nor strut in gaudy plumes, but shrinks from every kind of ostentatious and obvious pretension into the retirement of his own mind.

That mind was, as has been said, stored with a wealth from among the best of English literature, and when Lamb expressed himself it was always in pure literary fashion. He was a bookman writing for those who love things of the mind which can only be passed from generation to generation by means of books. In this we may recognize the reason—wholly unconscious to the writer—for the allusiveness of his style: it is often that subtle allusiveness which takes for granted as much knowledge in the reader as in the writer of the thing or passage to which allusion is made. In the sixteenth century such allusiveness was generally fruit of an extensive knowledge of the ancient classics; but though the references differ, the manner is much the same in Charles Lamb as in Jeremy Taylor and Sir Thomas Browne.

Less confident critics than those mentioned at the beginning of this section may yet readily recognize the general individuality of the style in which Elia revealed himself through the medium of his pen. To his lifelong habit of browsing among old books, his especial fondness for the writers of the sixteenth century, he owed no small part of the richness of his vocabulary, which enabled him frequently to use with fine effect happy old words in place of current makeshifts. In one of his early letters to Coleridge



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where he mentions having just finished reading Chapman's Homer, Lamb, seizing upon a phrase in that translation, says with gusto, "what *endless egression of phrases* the dog commands." The word arrided him (to employ another, the use of which he recovered for us), and he could not forbear making a note of it. He had, indeed, something of an instinctive genius for finding words that had passed more or less into desuetude, and a happy way of re-introducing them to enrich the plainer prose of his day. He did it naturally, even as though inevitably, and without any such air of coxcombical affectation as would have destroyed the flavour of the whole. Lamb was so thoroughly imbued with the thought and modes of expression of the rich Elizabethan and Stuart periods that his use of obsolescent words was probably more often than not quite unconscious.

The egotism of Elia's style in addressing his readers has been said to be founded on that of Sir Thomas Browne, and in a measure there can be little doubt that it was so—but only in a measure, for it is something the same egotism as that of Montaigne, is, indeed, the natural attitude of the familiar essayist who must be egotistic, not from self-consciousness but from the lack of it. In putting his opinions and experiences in the first person, we feel that Lamb did so almost unconsciously, because it was for him the easiest way of expressing himself. It was not, in fact, egotism at all in the commonly accepted sense of meaning, too frequent or self-laudatory use of the personal pronoun.

## CHRONOLOGICAL LIST OF WORKS

Those books with an asterisk against their date were only in part the work of Charles Lamb.

1796. *Poems on Various Subjects*, by S. T. Coleridge (included four sonnets signed C. L., described in the preface as by "Mr. Charles Lamb of the India House").

1796. *Poems on the Death of Priscilla Farmer*, by her grandson, Charles Lloyd (included "The Grandame," by Lamb).

1797. *Poems by S. T. Coleridge*, second edition, to which are now added *Poems by Charles Lamb and Charles Lloyd*.

1798. *Blank Verse* by Charles Lloyd and Charles Lamb.

1798. *A Tale of Rosamund Gray and Old Blind Margaret* (afterwards simply entitled "Rosamund Gray").

1802. *John Woodvil*, a Tragedy; with *Fragments of Burton*.



1805. The King and Queen of Hearts: Showing how notably the Queen made her Tarts and how scurvily the Knave stole them away with other particulars belonging thereunto.

1807. *Tales from Shakespear, designed for the use of young Persons. 2 vols. (By Charles and Mary Lamb, though only the name of the former appeared on the original title-page.)*

1807 or 1808. *Mrs. Leicester's School, or the History of several young Ladies related by themselves (by Charles and Mary Lamb).*



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1808. The Adventures of Ulysses.

1808. Specimens of English Dramatic Poets who lived about the Time of Shakespeare.

1809. *Poetry for Children. Entirely original. By the author of "Mrs. Leicester's School."*

1811. Prince Dorus; or Flattery put out of Countenance. A Poetical Version of an Ancient Tale.

[1811. Beauty and the Beast; or a Rough Outside with Gentle Heart. A Poetical Version of an Ancient Tale; credited to Lamb by some authorities but on inconclusive evidence.]

1818. The Works of Charles Lamb. In 2 vols.

1823. Elia. Essays which have appeared under that title in the "London Magazine" (now known as "Essays of Elia"):

The South-Sea House.

Oxford in the Vacation.

Christ's Hospital Five-and-Thirty Years ago.

The Two Races of Men.

New Year's Eve.

Mrs. Battle's Opinions on Whist.

A Chapter on Ears.

All Fools' Day.

A Quakers' Meeting.

The Old and the New Schoolmaster.

Valentine's Day.

Imperfect Sympathies.

Witches and other Night Fears.

My Relations.

Mackery End in Hertfordshire.

Modern Gallantry.

The Old Benchers of the Inner Temple.

Grace before Meat.

My First Play.

Dream-Children: a Reverie.

Distant Correspondents.

The Praise of Chimney-Sweepers.

A Complaint of the Decay of Beggars in the Metropolis.

A Dissertation upon Roast Pig.



A Bachelor's Complaint of the Behaviour of Married People.  
On some of the Old Actors.  
On the Artificial Comedy of the Last Century.  
On the Acting of Munden.

1830. Album Verses, with a few others.

1831. Satan in Search of a Wife.

1833. The Last Essays of Elia.

Preface.

Blakesmoor in H——shire.

Poor Relations.

Stage Illusion.

To the Shade of Elliston.

Ellistoniana.

Detached Thoughts on Books and Reading.

The Old Margate Hoy.

The Convalescent.

Sanity of True Genius.

Captain Jackson.

The Superannuated Man.

The Genteel Style in Writing.

Barbara S——.

The Tombs in the Abbey.

Amicus Redivivus.

Some Sonnets of Sir Philip Sydney.

Newspapers Thirty-five Years Ago.

Barrenness of the Imaginative Faculty in the Productions of Modern Art.

Rejoicings upon the New Year's Coming of Age.

The Wedding.

The Child Angel.

Old China.

Confessions of a Drunkard.

Popular Fallacies.

## II. POSTHUMOUS WORKS AND COLLECTED EDITIONS

1837. Poetical Works of Charles Lamb.

1837. Letters of Charles Lamb, with a Sketch of his Life, by Thomas Noon Talfourd. 2 vols.

1848. The Final Memorials of Charles Lamb. By T. N. Talfourd.



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1865. Eliana. Collected by J. E. Babson.
1875. Works. Centenary edition, with Memoir by Charles Kent.
1876. Life, Letters and Writings of Lamb. Edited by Percy Fitzgerald.
- 1883-8. Lamb's Works and Correspondence. Edited by Alfred Ainger. 12 vols.
1886. Letters of Charles Lamb (being Talfourd's two works in one with additions). Edited by W. Carew Hazlitt. Bohn's Standard Library.
1893. Bon Mots of Charles Lamb, *etc.* Edited by Walter Jerrold.
- 1903-4. The Works of Charles Lamb. Edited by William Macdonald. 12 vols.
- 1903-5. The Works of Charles Lamb. Edited by E. V. Lucas. 7 vols.
1904. Letters of Charles Lamb. Edited by Alfred Ainger. New edition. 2 vols. Eversley Series.

### III. BIOGRAPHY AND CRITICISM

See entries under 1837 and 1848, *etc.*, in preceding section.

1866. Charles Lamb: a Memoir. By Barry Cornwall.
1866. Lamb, his Friends, Haunts, Books. By Percy Fitzgerald.
1882. Charles Lamb. By Alfred Ainger in the English Men of Letters Series (revised and enlarged edition, 1888).
1891. In the Footprints of Lamb. By B. E. Martin.
1897. The Lambs: New Particulars. By W. C. Hazlitt.
1898. Charles Lamb and the Lloyds. Edited by E. V. Lucas.
1900. Lamb and Hazlitt: Further Letters and Records, hitherto Unpublished. Edited by W. C. Hazlitt.
1903. Sidelights on Charles Lamb. By Bertram Dobell.
1905. Life of Charles Lamb. By E. V. Lucas. 2 vols.

The above list does not include separate editions of the “Essays” and other works; most of Lamb’s writings are obtainable to-day in cheap and convenient forms.