

**THE RIVERSIDE  
LITERATURE SERIES;  
THE ESSAYS OF ELIA**

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The Riverside Literature Series; The Essays of Elia by Charles Lamb

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**CHARLES LAMB**

**THE RIVERSIDE  
LITERATURE SERIES;  
THE ESSAYS OF ELIA**





*Chamb.*

The Riverside Literature Series

THE ESSAYS OF ELIA.

BY

CHARLES LAMB

*SELECTED*

WITH BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH, BIBLIOGRAPHY,  
AND NOTES



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## CHARLES LAMB

THAT period of English literature which began with the end of the eighteenth century and ended with the beginning of the second third of the nineteenth was one of great significance. It saw the full development of romantic poetry in the writings of the Lake Poets, and of romantic fiction in the novels of Scott; it heard a note of genuine realism in the stories of Jane Austen; it gave birth to the revolutionary poetry of Byron and Shelley; it compassed the whole of the life of Keats, lover and creator of beauty; it ushered in a brilliant group of essayists, Hazlitt, Jeffrey, Wilson, Lamb, De Quincey, Leigh Hunt, Landor, who, in the pages of the young reviews, aroused a fresh and a critical interest in literature. Among these last, the most interesting personality, perhaps, was that of Charles Lamb, the "gentle Elia." To know Lamb is to know the whole group; for his letters and essays are full of allusions to them all, and in their writings no name is spoken more often or more lovingly than his. "The most beloved of English writers may be Goldsmith or may be Scott," says Swinburne, "but the best beloved will always be Lamb."

Charles Lamb was born February 10, 1775, in the Temple, on the banks of the Thames in London; and in London or its immediate neighborhood he lived all his days. The most perfect description of his early home and of his father we may read in his essay, *The Old Benchers of the Inner Temple*. Of three children who survived infancy Charles was the youngest, and his name is forever indissolubly knit with that of his sister Mary, ten years older than himself. His earliest book learning came from a certain Mr. Bird, whose school admitted boys in the day and girls in the evening.

Lamb's  
Birth,  
1775, and  
Education

"Oh, how I remember our legs wedged into those uncomfortable sloping desks," wrote Lamb in 1826, "where we



sat elbowing each other; and the injunctions to attain a free hand, inattainable in that position; the first copy I wrote after, with its moral lesson, 'Art improves Nature;' the still earlier pot-books and the hangers, some traces of which I fear may yet be apparent in the manuscript." Considering the poverty of the family, it was great good luck for Lamb, when eight years old, to be removed to Christ's Hospital, where he remained for the next seven years. His own words are again the best record we have of these years, — in *Recollections of Christ's Hospital* and *Christ's Hospital Five and Thirty Years Ago*. Here began that memorable friendship with Coleridge, "the poor friendless boy," who used to steal away from the playground to read Vergil by himself. Coleridge's picture of the "Blue Coat School," as given in his *Biographia Literaria*, and Hunt's description of it as it was three years later, should be read, as giving with Lamb's an all-round impression of this famous English school. Hunt speaks in his sketch of Lamb's "pensive, brown, handsome and kindly face," and of his Quaker-like dress that distinguished him through life. According to his own statement Lamb gained here the rank of deputy Grecian, — the next to the highest; but an impediment in his speech seems to have prevented his obtaining an "exhibition" to the university.

At fifteen Lamb left school to help in the support of his family. To understand the home conditions to which he returned we need only read as biography *Mackery End in Hertfordshire* and *My Relations*. The elder brother, John, earning a good salary, living by himself and indulging his artistic tastes, troubled himself little with the needs of his family. Mary was to share with Charles all the anxieties of supporting and protecting a helpless mother and invalid father. A dark shadow rested upon them all in the inherited taint of intermittent insanity which appeared in different forms in all the children, — both a memory and an expectation that darkened their happiest moments. But the brother and sister found solace in their common love of books, and in an occasional visit to their grandmother's country home at Blakesware,

where carved woodwork, faded tapestries, and tangled gardens awakened all that love of beauty that breathes in the essay on *Blakesmoor in H—shire*.

Sometime during the next two years Lamb obtained a humble position in the South-Sea House. Of his service here we have no more exact account than the shadows of facts which we find in the first of the papers signed "Elia." Strangely enough, no letter or bit of writing by Lamb exists dated earlier than 1795. In April, 1792, he obtained a better position in the East India Company, and in their service he remained the rest of his working days. In this year of his promotion a small legacy was left to the family by Samuel Salt, in whose office Lamb's father had served for years as scrivener.

Connection  
with the  
South-Sea  
House

Connection  
with the  
East India  
Company

This generous friend is appreciatively described by Lamb as S. in the essay on the *Old Benchers*; and the "spacious closet of good old English reading" into which *Mackery End* tells us that Mary Lamb was "tumbled early to browse at will upon a fair and wholesome pasturage" was, without doubt, his library. This bequest, with Lamb's own salary, and the little which Mary earned by sewing, seems to have been sufficient for the maintenance of their quiet home in Little Queen Street, Holborn.

The greatest pleasures of these days were the occasional visits from Coleridge, now a student at Cambridge. At "The Salutation and the Cat," he and Lamb spent long evenings in discussing their favorite writers, and dreaming of the time when they, too, should be "authors in print." Coleridge was already writing verse for *The Morning Chronicle*, and in his first volume, published by Cottle of Bristol, in 1796, Lamb printed four sonnets of his own. "The effusions signed 'C. L.' were written by Mr. Charles Lamb of the India House" may still be read in the preface of this edition. In these sonnets we may find, if we will, stray touches of the early romance of Lamb's life, — enough to gather that he gave his heart's love to his "fair-haired maid," while he was forced to give his devotion and support to the needs of

Friendship  
with  
Coleridge

his family. Perhaps he feared, also, his own inherited share of the family malady. One attack seems to have come upon him already, for in one of his earliest letters to Coleridge, 1796, he writes: "The six weeks that finished last year and began this, your very humble servant spent very agreeably in a mad house at Hoxton. I am got somewhat rational now, and don't bite any more. But mad I was!"

The same year proved to be the most tragic in the family history of the Lamb. Mary, temporarily deranged by overwork, took the life of her mother. No one has written half

**Tragedy of  
Mary  
Lamb's  
Life**

so delicately of the awfulness of the calamity as Lamb himself to Coleridge: "My poor, dear, dearest sister, the unhappy and unconscious instrument of the Almighty's judgment on our house, is restored to her senses; to a dreadful sense and recollection of what has past, awful to her mind and impressive (as it must be to the end of life), but tempered with religious resignation and the reasonings of a sound judgment, which, in this early stage, knows how to distinguish between a deed committed in a transient bit of frenzy and the terrible guilt of a mother's murder." The rest of the letter shows the steady course and dutiful care which from now on marked Lamb's affection for his sister. The mania never returned upon him; but Mary was to suffer recurring attacks as long as she lived. One of the saddest pictures in all literature is that drawn for us by Charles Lloyd, who on one occasion met the brother and sister, "slowly pacing together a little footpath in Hoxton fields, both weeping bitterly; and found on joining them, that they were taking their solemn way to the accustomed asylum."

In 1797 Lamb became the lonely companion of his father, during whose lifetime he had decided that Mary should not return home. Books were now his greatest solace. He read and loved the old English writers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, "preferring *by-ways* to highways." "I gather myself up unto the old things," he was always saying, and his dictum, "when a new book comes out, I read an old one," has passed into history. His love for Beaumont, Fletcher,

**Lamb's  
Love of  
Reading**