GILCHRIST ANNE BURROWS

MARY LAMB

Anne Gilchrist

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Gilchrist A.

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Содержание

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PREFACE

I am indebted to Mrs. Henry Watson, a granddaughter of Mr. Gillman, for one or two interesting reminiscences, and for a hitherto unpublished "notelet" by Lamb (p. 248), together with an omitted paragraph from a published letter (p. 84), which confirms what other letters also show, – that the temporary estrangement between Lamb and Coleridge was mainly due to the influence of the morbid condition of mind of their common friend, Charles Lloyd.

My thanks are also due to Mr. Potts for some bibliographic details respecting the various editions of the *Tales from Shakespeare*.

Reprinted here, for the first time, is a little essay on *Needle-work* (regarded from an industrial, not an "art" point of view), by Mary Lamb (p. 186), unearthed from an obscure and long-deceased periodical —*The British Lady's Magazine*– for which I have to thank Mr. Edward Solly, F.R.S.

The reader will find, also, the only letter that has been preserved from Coleridge to Lamb, who destroyed all the rest in a moment of depression (pp. 24-6). This letter is given, without exact date or name of the person to whom it was addressed, in Gillman's unfinished *Life of Coleridge*, as having been written "to a friend in great anguish of mind on the sudden death of his mother," and has, I believe, never before been identified. But the internal evidence that it was to Lamb is decisive.

In taking Mary as the central figure in the following narrative, woven mainly from her own and her brother's letters and writings, it is to that least explored time, from 1796 to 1815 – before they had made the acquaintance of Judge Talfourd, Proctor, Patmore, De Quincey, and other friends, who have left written memorials of them – that we are brought nearest; the period, that is, of Charles' youth and early manhood. For Mary was the elder by ten years; and there is but little to tell of the last twenty of her eighty-three years of life, when the burthen of age was added to that of her sad malady.

The burial-register of St. Andrew's, Holborn, in which church-yard Lamb's father, mother and aunt Hetty were buried, shows that the father survived his wife's tragic death nearly three years instead of only a few months as Talfourd, and others following him, have supposed. It is a date of some interest because not till then did brother and sister begin together their life of "double singleness" and entire mutual devotion. Also, in sifting the letters for facts and dates, I find that Lamb lived in Chapel Street, Pentonville not, as Talfourd and Proctor thought, a few months, but three years, removing thither almost immediately after the mother's death. It is a trifle, yet not without interest to the lovers of Lamb, for these were the years in which he met in his daily walks, and loved but never accosted, the beautiful Quakeress "Hester," whose memory is enshrined in the poem beginning "When Maidens such as Hester die."

Anne Gilchrist.

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CHAPTER I

Parentage and Childhood

1764-1775. – Æt. 1-10

The story of Mary Lamb's life is mainly the story of a brother and sister's love; of how it sustained them under the shock of a terrible calamity and made beautiful and even happy a life which must else have sunk into desolation and despair.

It is a record, too, of many friendships. Round the biographer of Mary as of Charles, the blended stream of whose lives cannot be divided into two distinct currents, there gathers a throng of faces – radiant immortal faces some, many homely every-day faces, a few almost grotesque – whom he can no more shut out of his pages, if he would give a faithful picture of life and character, than Charles or Mary could have shut their humanity-loving hearts or hospitable doors against them. First comes Coleridge, earliest and best beloved friend of all, to whom Mary was "a most dear heart's sister"; Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy; Southey; Hazlitt who, quarrel with whom he might, could not effectually quarrel with the Lambs; his wife, also, without whom Mary would have been a comparatively silent figure to us, a presence rather than a voice. But all kinds were welcome so there were but character; the more variety the better. "I am made up of queer points," wrote Lamb, "and I want so many answering needles." And of both brother and sister it may be said that their likes wore as well as most people's loves.

Mary Anne Lamb was born in Crown Office Row, Inner Temple, on the 3rd of December 1764 – year of Hogarth's death. She was the third, as Charles was the youngest, of seven children all of whom died in infancy save these two and an elder brother John, her senior by two years. One little sister Elizabeth, who came when Mary was four years old, lived long enough to imprint an image on the child's memory which, helped by a few relics, remained for life. "The little cap with white satin ribbon grown yellow with long keeping and a lock of light hair," wrote Mary when she was near sixty, "always brought her pretty fair face to my view so that to this day I seem to have a perfect recollection of her features."

The family of the Lambs came originally from Stamford in Lincolnshire, as Charles himself once told a correspondent. Nothing else is known of Mary's ancestry; nor yet even the birth-place or earliest circumstances of John Lamb the father. If, however, we may accept on Mr. Cowden Clarke's authority, corroborated by internal evidence, the little storyof *Susan Yates*, contributed by Charles to *Mrs. Leicester's School*, as embodying some of his father's earliest recollections, he was born of parents "in no very affluent circumstances" in a lonely part of the Fen country, seven miles from the nearest church an occasional visit to which, "just to see how *goodness thrived*," was a feat to be remembered, such bad and dangerous walking was it in the fens in those days, "a mile as good as four." What is quite certain is that while John Lamb was still a child his family removed to Lincoln, with means so straitened that he was sent to service in London. Whether his father were dead or, sadder still, in a lunatic asylum – since we are told with emphasis that the hereditary seeds of madness in the Lamb family came from the father's side – it is beyond doubt that misfortune of some kind must have been the cause of the child's being sent thus prematurely to earn his bread in service. His subsequently becoming a barrister's clerk seems to indicate that his early nurture and education had been of a gentler kind than this rough thrusting out into the world of a mere child would otherwise imply: in

confirmation of which it is to be noted that afterwards, in the dark crisis of family misfortune, an "old gentlewoman of fortune" appears on the scene as a relative.

In spite of early struggles John Lamb grew up

> A merry cheerful man. A merrier man,
> A man more apt to frame matter for mirth,
> Mad jokes and antics for a Christmas-eve,
> Making life social and the laggard time
> To move on nimbly, never yet did cheer
> The little circle of domestic friends.

Inflexibly honest and upright too, with a dash of chivalry in his nature; who is not familiar with his portrait as "Lovel" in *The Benchers of the Inner Temple*? Elizabeth his wife, a native of Ware, whose maiden name was Field, was many years younger than himself. She was a handsome, dignified-looking woman; like her husband fond of pleasure; a good and affectionate mother, also, in the main, yet lacking insight into the characters of her children – into Mary's at any rate, towards whom she never manifested that maternal tenderness which makes the heart wise whatever the head may be. Mary, a shy, sensitive, nervous, affectionate child, who early showed signs of a liability to brain disorder, above all things needed tender and judicious care. "Her mother loved her," wrote Charles in after years, "as she loved us all, with a mother's love; but in opinion, in feeling and sentiment and disposition bore so distant a resemblance to her daughter that she never understood her right – never could believe how much *she* loved her – but met her caresses, her protestations of filial affection too frequently with coldness and repulse. Still she was a good mother. God forbid I should think of her but most respectfully, most affectionately. Yet she would always love my brother above Mary, who was not worthy of one-tenth of that affection which Mary had a right to claim."

John, the eldest, a handsome, lively, active boy, was just what his good looks and his being the favourite were likely to make of a not very happily endowed nature. "Dear little selfish craving John" he was in childhood, and dear big selfish John he remained in manhood; treated with tender indulgence by his brother and sister who cheerfully exonerated him from taking up any share of the burthen of sorrow and privation which became the portion of his family by the time he was grown up and prosperously afloat.

A maiden aunt, a worthy but uncanny old soul whose odd silent ways and odder witch-like mutterings and mumblings coupled with a wild look in her eyes as she peered out from under her spectacles, made her an object of dread rather than love to Mary as afterwards to Charles in whom she garnered up her heart, completed the family group but did not add to its harmony for she and her sister-in-law ill agreed. They were in "their different ways," wrote Mary, looking back on childhood from middle-life, "the best creatures in the world; but they set out wrong at first. They made each other miserable for full twenty years of their lives. My mother was a perfect gentlewoman; my aunty as unlike a gentlewoman as you can possibly imagine a good old woman to be; so that my dear mother (who, though you do not know it, is always in my poor head and heart), used to distress and weary her with incessant and unceasing attention and politeness to gain her affection. The old woman could not return this in kind and did not know what to make of it – thought it all deceit, and used to hate my mother with a bitter hatred; which, of course, was soon returned with interest. A little frankness and looking into each other's characters at first would have spared all this, and they would have lived as they died, fond of each other for the last ten years of their lives. When we grew up and harmonised them a little, they sincerely loved each other."

In these early days Mary's was a comfortable though a very modest home; a place of "snug fire-sides, the low-built roof, parlours ten feet by ten, frugal boards, and all the homeliness of home"; a wholesome soil to be planted in which permitted no helplessness in the practical details of domestic

life; above poverty in the actual though not in the conventional sense of the word. Such book-learning as fell to her lot was obtained at a day-school in Fetter Lane, Holborn, where, notwithstanding the inscription over the door, "Mr. William Bird, Teacher of Mathematics and Languages," reading in the mother-tongue, writing and "ciphering" were all that was learned. The school-room looked into a dingy, discoloured garden, in the passage leading from Fetter Lane into Bartlett's Buildings; and there boys were taught in the morning and their sisters in the afternoon by "a gentle usher" named Starkey, whose subsequent misfortunes have rescued him and Mary's school-days from oblivion. For, having in his old age drifted into an almshouse at Newcastle, the tale of his wanderings and his woes found its way into print and finally into Hone's *Every Day Book*, where, meeting the eyes of Charles and Mary Lamb, it awakened in both old memories which took shape in the sketch called *Captain Starkey*.

"Poor Starkey, when young, had that peculiar stamp of old-fashionedness in his face which makes it impossible for a beholder to predict any particular age in the object. You can scarce make a guess between seventeen and seven-and-thirty. This antique caste always seems to promise ill-luck and penury. Yet it seems he was not always the abject thing he came to. My sister, who well remembers him, can hardly forgive Mr. Thomas Ranson for making an etching so unlike her idea of him when he was at Mr. Bird's school. Old age and poverty, a life-long poverty she thinks, could at no time have effaced the marks of native gentility which were once so visible in a face otherwise strikingly ugly, thin, and careworn. From her recollections of him, she thinks that he would have wanted bread before he would have begged or borrowed a halfpenny. 'If any of the girls,' she says, 'who were my school-fellows should be reading through their aged spectacles tidings from the dead of their youthful friend Starkey, they will feel a pang as I do at having teased his gentle spirit.'

"They were big girls, it seems, too old to attend his instructions with the silence necessary; and, however old age and a long state of beggary seems to have reduced his writing faculties to a state of imbecility, in those days his language occasionally rose to the bold and figurative, for, when he was in despair to stop their chattering, his ordinary phrase was, 'Ladies, if you will not hold your peace, not all the powers in heaven can make you.' Once he was missing for a day or two; he had run away. A little, old, unhappy-looking man brought him back – it was his father, and he did no business in the school that day but sat moping in a corner with his hands before his face; the girls, his tormentors, in pity for his case, for the rest of the day forbore to annoy him.

"'I had been there but a few months,' adds she, 'when Starkey, who was the chief instructor of us girls, communicated to us a profound secret, that the tragedy of Cato was shortly to be acted by the elder boys, and that we were to be invited to the representation.' That Starkey lent a helping hand in fashioning the actors she remembers; and, but for his unfortunate person, he might have had some distinguished part in the scene to enact. As it was he had the arduous task of prompter assigned to him and his feeble voice was heard clear and distinct repeating the text during the whole performance. She describes her recollection of the caste of characters even now with a relish: – Martia, by the handsome Edgar Hickman, who afterwards went to Africa, and of whom she never afterwards heard tidings; Lucia, by Master Walker, whose sister was her particular friend; Cato, by John Hunter, a masterly declaimer but a plain boy, and shorter by a head than his two sons in the scene, &c. In conclusion, Starkey appears to have been one of those mild spirits which, not originally deficient in understanding, are crushed by penury into dejection and feebleness. He might have proved a useful adjunct, if not an ornament to society, if fortune had taken him into a very little fostering; but wanting that he became a captain – a by-word – and lived and died a broken bulrush."

But the chief and best part of Mary's education was due to the fact that her father's employer, Mr. Salt, had a good library "into which she was tumbled early" and suffered to "browse there without much selection or prohibition." A little selection, however, would have made the pasturage all the wholesomer to a child of Mary's sensitive brooding nature; for the witch-stories and cruel tales of the sufferings of the martyrs on which she pored all alone, as her brother did after her, wrought upon

her tender brain and lent their baleful aid to nourish those seeds of madness which she inherited; as may be inferred from a subsequent adventure.

When tripping to and from school or playing in the Temple Gardens Mary must sometimes, though we have no record of the fact, have set eyes on Oliver Goldsmith: for the first ten years of her life were the last of his; spent, though with frequent sojourns elsewhere, in the Temple. And in the Temple churchyard he was buried, just ten months before the birth of Charles.

The London born and bred child had occasional tastes of joyous, healthful life in the country, for her mother had hospitable relatives in her native county, pleasant Hertfordshire. Specially was there a great-aunt married to a substantial yeoman named Gladman living at Mackery End within a gentle walk of Wheathampstead, the visits to whom remained in Mary's memory as the most delightful recollections of her childhood. In after life she embodied them, mingling fiction with fact, in a story called *Louisa Manners or the Farm House* where she tells in sweet and child-like words of the ecstasy of a little four-year-old girl on finding herself for the first time in the midst of fields quite full of bright shining yellow flowers with sheep and young lambs feeding; of the inexhaustible interest of the farm-yard, the thresher in the barn with his terrifying flail and black beard, the collecting of eggs and searching for scarce violets ("if we could find eggs and violets too, what happy children we were"); of the hay-making and the sheep-shearing, the great wood fires and the farm-house suppers.

This will recall to the reader Elia's *Mackery End*; how, forty years afterwards, brother and sister revisited the old farm-house one day in the midst of June and how Bridget (so he always called Mary in print) "remembered her old acquaintance again; some altered features, of course, a little grudged at. At first, indeed, she was ready to disbelieve for joy; but the scene soon re-confirmed itself in her affections, and she traversed every out-post of the old mansion, to the wood-house, the orchard, the place where the pigeon-house had stood (house and birds were alike flown), with a breathless impatience of recognition which was more pardonable perhaps than decorous at the age of fifty odd. But Bridget in some things is behind her years."

"… The only thing left was to get into the house, and that was a difficulty which to me singly would have been insurmountable, for I am terribly shy in making myself known to strangers and out-of-date kinsfolk. Love, stronger than scruple, winged my cousin in without me; but she soon returned with a creature that might have sat to a sculptor for the image of Welcome… To have seen Bridget and her, – it was like the meeting of the two scriptural cousins! There was a grace and dignity, an amplitude of form and stature answering to her mind in this farmer's wife, which would have shined in a palace…"

To return to the days of childhood, Mary also paid visits to her maternal grandmother Field, housekeeper to the Plumers at their stately but forsaken mansion of Blakesware; but here the pleasure was mingled with a kind of weird solemnity. Mary has left on record her experiences in a tale which forms a sort of pendant to *Blakesmoor in H – shire* by Elia. Her story is called *Margaret Green, the Young Mahometan*, also from *Mrs. Leicester's School* and, apart from a slight framework of invention ("Mrs. Beresford," her grandmother, being represented as the owner instead of housekeeper of the mansion), is minutely autobiographical. "Every morning when she (Mrs. Beresford) saw me she used to nod her head very kindly and say 'How do you do, little Margaret?' But I do not recollect that she ever spoke to me during the remainder of the day, except indeed after I had read the psalms and the chapters which was my daily task; then she used constantly to observe that I improved in my reading and frequently added, 'I never heard a child read so distinctly.' When my daily portion of reading was over I had a taste of needle-work, which generally lasted half an hour. I was not allowed to pass more time in reading or work, because my eyes were very weak, for which reason I was always set to read in the large-print family Bible. I was very fond of reading, and when I could, unobserved, steal a few minutes as they were intent on their work, I used to delight to read in the historical part of the Bible; but this, because of my eyes, was a forbidden pleasure, and the Bible being never removed out of the room, it was only for a short time together that I dared softly to lift up the leaves and peep into it. As

I was permitted to walk in the garden or wander about the house whenever I pleased, I used to leave the parlour for hours together, and make out my own solitary amusement as well as I could. My first visit was always to a very large hall, which, from being paved with marble, was called the Marble Hall. The heads of the twelve Cæsars were hung round the hall. Every day I mounted on the chairs to look at them and to read the inscriptions underneath, till I became perfectly familiar with their names and features. Hogarth's prints were below the Cæsars. I was very fond of looking at them and endeavouring to make out their meaning. An old broken battledore and some shuttle-cocks with most of the feathers missing were on a marble slab in one corner of the hall, which constantly reminded me that there had once been younger inhabitants here than the old lady and her grey-headed servants. In another corner stood a marble figure of a satyr; every day I laid my hand on his shoulder to feel how cold he was. This hall opened into a room full of family portraits. They were all in dresses of former times; some were old men and women, and some were children. I used to long to have a fairy's power to call the children down from their frames to play with me. One little girl in particular, who hung by the side of the glass door which opened into the garden, I often invited to walk there with me; but she still kept her station, one arm round a little lamb's neck and in her hand a large bunch of roses. From this room I usually proceeded to the garden. When I was weary of the garden I wandered over the rest of the house. The best suite of rooms I never saw by any other light than what glimmered through the tops of the window-shutters, which, however, served to show the carved chimney-pieces and the curious old ornaments about the rooms; but the worked furniture and carpets of which I heard such constant praises I could have but an imperfect sight of, peeping under the covers which were kept over them by the dim light; for I constantly lifted up a corner of the envious cloth that hid these highly praised rareties from my view.

"The bedrooms were also regularly explored by me, as well to admire the antique furniture as for the sake of contemplating the tapestry hangings which were full of Bible history. The subject of the one which chiefly attracted my attention was Hagar and her son Ishmael. Every day I admired the beauty of the youth, and pitied the forlorn state of him and his mother in the wilderness. At the end of the gallery into which these tapestry rooms opened was one door which, having often in vain attempted to open, I concluded to be locked; and finding myself shut out, I was very desirous of seeing what it contained and, though still foiled in the attempt, I every day endeavoured to turn the lock, which, whether by constantly trying I loosened, being probably a very old one, or that the door was not locked but fastened tight by time, I know not; to my great joy, as I was one day trying the lock as usual, it gave way, and I found myself in this so long desired room.

"It proved to be a very large library. This was indeed a precious discovery. I looked round on the books with the greatest delight: I thought I would read them every one. I now forsook all my favourite haunts and passed all my time here. I took down first one book, then another. If you never spent whole mornings alone in a large library, you cannot conceive the pleasure of taking down books in the constant hope of finding an entertaining book among them; yet, after many days, meeting with nothing but disappointment, it became less pleasant. All the books within my reach were folios of the gravest cast. I could understand very little that I read in them, and the old dark print and the length of the lines made my eyes ache.

"When I had almost resolved to give up the search as fruitless, I perceived a volume lying in an obscure corner of the room. I opened it; it was a charming print, the letters were almost as large as the type of the family Bible. In the first page I looked into I saw the name of my favourite Ishmael, whose face I knew so well from the tapestry, and whose history I had often read in the Bible. I sat myself down to read this book with the greatest eagerness. The title of it was *Mahometanism Explained*… A great many of the leaves were torn out, but enough remained to make me imagine that Ishmael was the true son of Abraham. I read here that the true descendants of Abraham were known by a light which streamed from the middle of their foreheads. It said that Ishmael's father and mother first saw this light streaming from his forehead as he was lying asleep in the cradle. I was very sorry so

many of the leaves were torn out, for it was as entertaining as a fairy tale. I used to read the history of Ishmael and then go and look at him in the tapestry, and then read his history again. When I had almost learned the history of Ishmael by heart, I read the rest of the book, and then I came to the history of Mahomet who was there said to be the last descendant of Abraham.

"If Ishmael had engaged so much of my thoughts, how much more so must Mahomet? His history was full of nothing but wonders from the beginning to the end. The book said that those who believed all the wonderful stories which were related of Mahomet were called Mahometans and True Believers; I concluded that I must be a Mahometan, for I believed every word I read.

"At length I met with something which I also believed, though I trembled as I read it. This was, that after we are dead we are to pass over a narrow bridge which crosses a bottomless gulf. The bridge was described to be no wider than a silken thread, and it is said that all who were not Mahometans would slip on one side of this bridge and drop into the tremendous gulf that had no bottom. I considered myself as a Mahometan, yet I was perfectly giddy whenever I thought of passing over this bridge. One day, seeing the old lady totter across the room, a sudden terror seized me for I thought how would she ever be able to get over the bridge? Then, too, it was that I first recollected that my mother would also be in imminent danger; for I imagined she had never heard the name of Mahomet, because I foolishly conjectured this book had been locked up for ages in the library and was utterly unknown to the rest of the world.

"All my desire was now to tell them the discovery I had made; for, I thought, when they knew of the existence of *Mahometanism Explained* they would read it and become Mahometans to ensure themselves a safe passage over the silken bridge. But it wanted more courage than I possessed to break the matter to my intended converts; I must acknowledge that I had been reading without leave; and the habit of never speaking or being spoken to considerably increased the difficulty.

"My anxiety on this subject threw me into a fever. I was so ill that my mother thought it necessary to sleep in the same room with me. In the middle of the night I could not resist the strong desire I felt to tell her what preyed so much on my mind.

"I awoke her out of a sound sleep and begged she would be so kind as to be a Mahometan. She was very much alarmed, for she thought I was delirious, which I believe I was; for I tried to explain the reason of my request, but it was in such an incoherent manner that she could not at all comprehend what I was talking about. The next day a physician was sent for and he discovered, by several questions that he put to me, that I had read myself into a fever. He gave me medicines and ordered me to be kept very quiet and said he hoped in a few days I should be very well; but as it was a new case to him, he never having attended a little Mahometan before, if any lowness continued after he had removed the fever he would, with my mother's permission, take me home with him to study this extraordinary case at his leisure; and added that he could then hold a consultation with his wife who was often very useful to him in prescribing remedies for the maladies of his younger patients."

In the sequel, this sensible and kindly doctor takes his little patient home, and restores her by giving her child-like wholesome pleasures and rational sympathy. I fear that this only shadowed forth the wise tenderness with which Mary Lamb would have treated such a child rather than what befell herself; and that with the cruelty of ignorance Mary's mother and grandmother suffered her young spirit to do battle still, in silence and inward solitariness, with the phantoms imagination conjured up in her too-sensitive brain. "Polly, what are those poor crazy, moythered brains of yours thinking always?" was worthy Mrs. Field's way of endeavouring to win the confidence of the thoughtful suffering child. The words in the story, "my mother almost wholly discontinued talking to me," "I scarcely ever heard a word addressed to me from morning to night" have a ring of truth, of bitter experience in them, which makes the heart ache. Yet it was no result of sullenness on either side, least of all did it breed any ill-feeling on Mary's. It was simple stupidity, lack of insight or sympathy in the elders; and on hers was repaid by the sweetest affection and, in after years, by a self-

sacrificing devotion which, carried at last far beyond her strength, led to the great calamity of her life. Grandmother Field was a fine old character, however, as the reader of *Elia* well knows. She had

> A mounting spirit, one that entertained
> Scorn of base action, deed dishonourable
> Or aught unseemly.

Like her daughter, Mrs. Lamb, she had been a handsome stately woman in her prime and when bent with age and pain, for she suffered from a cruel malady, cheerful patience and fortitude gave her dignity of another and a higher kind. But, like her daughter, she seems to have been wanting in those finer elements of tenderness and sympathy which were of vital consequence in the rearing up of a child smitten like Mary with a hereditary tendency to madness.

CHAPTER II

Birth of Charles. – Coleridge. – Domestic Toils and Trials. – Their Tragic Culmination. – Letters to and from Coleridge

1775-1796. – Æt. 11-32

On the 10th of February 1775 arrived a new member into the household group in Crown Office Row – Charles, the child of his father's old age, the "weakly but very pretty babe," who was to prove their strong support. And now Mary was no longer a lonely girl. She was just old enough to be trusted to nurse and tend the baby and she became a mother to it. In after life she spoke of the comfort, the wholesome curative influence upon her young troubled mind, which this devotion to Charles in his infancy brought with it. And as he grew older rich was her reward; for he repaid the debt with a love half filial, half fraternal, than which no human tie was ever stronger or more sublimely adequate to the strain of a terrible emergency. As his young mind unfolded he found in her intelligence and love the same genial fostering influences that had cherished his feeble frame into health and strength. It was with his little hand in hers that he first trod the Temple gardens, and spelled out the inscriptions on the sun-dials and on the tombstones in the old burying-ground and wondered, finding only lists of the virtues "where all the naughty people were buried?" Like Mary, his disposition was so different from that of his gay, pleasure-loving parents that they but ill understood "and gave themselves little trouble about him," which also tended to draw brother and sister closer together. There are no other records of Mary's girlhood than such as may be gathered from the story of her brother's early life; of how when he was five and she was fifteen she came near to losing him from small-pox, Aunt Hetty grieving over him "the only thing in the world she loved" as she was wont to say, with a mother's tears. And how, three years later (in 1782), she had to give up his daily companionship and see him, now grown a handsome boy with "crisply curling black hair, clear brown complexion, aquiline, slightly Jewish cast of features, winning smile, and glittering, restless eyes," equipped as a Christ's Hospital boy and, with Aunt Hetty, to

> … peruse him round and round,
> And hardly know him in his yellow coats,
> Red leathern belt and gown of russet blue.

Coleridge was already a Blue Coat boy but older and too high above Charles in the school for comradeship then. To Lamb, with home close at hand, it was a happy time; but Coleridge, homeless and friendless in the great city, had no mitigations of the rough Spartan discipline which prevailed; and the weekly whole holidays when, turned adrift in the streets from morn till night, he had nothing but a crust of bread in his pockets and no resource but to beguile the pangs of hunger in summer with hours of bathing in the New River and in winter with furtive hanging round book-stalls wrought permanent harm to his fine-strung organisation. Nor did the gentleness of his disposition, or the brilliancy of his powers, save him from the birch-loving brutalities of old Boyer, who was wont to add an extra stripe "because he was so ugly."

In the Lamb household the domestic outlook grew dark as soon as Mary was grown up, for her father's faculties and her mother's health failed early; and when, in his fifteenth year, Charles left Christ's Hospital it was already needful for him to take up the burthens of a man on his young

shoulders; and for Mary not only to make head against sickness, helplessness, old age with its attendant exigencies but to add to the now straitened means by taking in millinery work.

For eleven years, as she has told us, she maintained herself by the needle; from the age of twenty-one to thirty-two, that is. It was not in poor old Aunt Hetty's nature to be helpful either. "She was from morning till night poring over good books and devotional exercises… The only secular employment I remember to have seen her engaged in was the splitting of French beans and dropping them into a basin of fair water," says Elia. Happily, a clerkship in the South Sea House, where his brother already was, enabled Charles to maintain his parents and a better post in the India House was obtained two years afterwards. Nor were there wanting snatches of pleasant holiday sometimes shared by Mary. Of one, a visit to the sea, there is a beautiful reminiscence in *The Old Margate Hoy*, written more than thirty years afterwards. "It was our first sea-side experiment," he says, "and many circumstances combined to make it the most agreeable holiday of my life. We had neither of us seen the sea" (he was fifteen and Mary twenty-six), "and we had never been from home so long together in company." The disappointment they both felt at the first sight of the sea he explains with one of his subtle and profound suggestions. "Is it not" … says he, "that we had expected to behold (absurdly I grant, but by the law of imagination inevitably) not a definite object compassable by the eye, but *all the sea at once, the commensurate antagonist of the earth*? Whereas the eye can but take in a 'slip of salt water.'" The whole passage is one of Elia's finest.

Then Coleridge too, who had remained two years longer at Christ's Hospital than Lamb and after he went up to Cambridge in 1791 continued to pay frequent visits to London, spent many a glorious evening, not only those memorable ones with Charles in the parlour of the "Salutation and Cat," but in his home; and was not slow to discover Mary's fine qualities and to take her into his brotherly heart as a little poem, written so early as 1794, to cheer his friend during a serious illness of hers testifies: —

Cheerily, dear Charles!
Thou thy best friend shalt cherish many a year
Such warm presages feel I of high hope.
For not uninterested the dear maid
I've viewed – her soul affectionate yet wise,
Her polished wit as mild as lambent glories
That play around a sainted infant's head.

The year 1795 witnessed changes for all. The father, now wholly in his dotage, was pensioned off by Mr. Salt and the family had to exchange their old home in the Temple for straitened lodgings in Little Queen Street, Holborn (the site of which and of the adjoining houses is now occupied by Trinity Church). Coleridge, too, had left Cambridge and was at Bristol, drawn thither by his newly formed friendship with Southey, lecturing, writing, dreaming of his ideal Pantisocracy on the banks of the Susquehannah and love-making. The love-making ended in marriage the autumn of that same year. Meanwhile Lamb, too, was first tasting the joys and sorrows of love. Alice W – lingers but as a shadow in the records of his life: the passion, however, was real enough and took deep hold of him, conspiring with the cares and trials of home life unrelieved now by the solace of Coleridge's society to give a fatal stimulus to the germs of brain-disease, which were part of the family heritage and for six weeks he was in a mad-house. "In your absence," he tells his friend afterwards, "the tide of melancholy rushed in, and did its worst mischief by overwhelming my reason." Who can doubt the memory of this attack strengthened the bond of sympathy between Mary and himself and gave him a fellow-feeling for her no amount of affection alone could have realised? As in her case, too, the disorder took the form of a great heightening and intensifying of the imaginative faculty. "I look back on it, at times," wrote he after his recovery, "with a gloomy kind of envy; for while it lasted I had many

many hours of pure happiness. Dream not, Coleridge, of having tasted all the grandeur and wildness of fancy, till you have gone mad… The sonnet I send you has small merit as poetry, but you will be curious to read it when I tell you it was written in my prison-house in one of my lucid intervals: —

TO MY SISTER

If from my lips some angry accents fell,
Peevish complaint, or harsh reproof unkind,
'Twas but the error of a sickly mind
And troubled thoughts, clouding the purer well,
And waters clear of Reason; and for me
Let this my verse the poor atonement be —
My verse, which thou to praise wert e'er inclined
Too highly, and with a partial eye to see
No blemish. Thou to me didst ever show
Kindest affection; and would oft-times lend
An ear to the desponding love-sick lay,
Weeping my sorrows with me, who repay
But ill the mighty debt of love I owe,
Mary, to thee, my sister and my friend.

No sooner was Charles restored to himself than the elder brother John met with a serious accident; and though whilst in health he had carried himself and his earnings to more comfortable quarters, he did not now fail to return and be nursed with anxious solicitude by his brother and sister. This was the last ounce. Mary, worn out with years of nightly as well as daily attendance upon her mother who was now wholly deprived of the use of her limbs, and harassed by a close application to needle-work to help her in which she had been obliged to take a young apprentice, was at last strained beyond the utmost pitch of physical endurance, "worn down to a state of extreme nervous misery." About the middle of September, she being then thirty-two years old, her family observed some symptoms of insanity in her which had so much increased by the 21st that her brother early in the morning went to Dr. Pitcairn who unhappily was out. On the afternoon of that day, seized with a sudden attack of frenzy, she snatched a knife from the table and pursued the young apprentice round the room when her mother interposing received a fatal stab and died instantly. Mary was totally unconscious of what she had done, Aunt Hetty fainted with terror, the father was too feeble in mind for any but a confused and transient impression; it was Charles alone who confronted all the anguish and horror of the scene. With the stern brevity of deep emotion he wrote to Coleridge five days afterwards: —

"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 mad-house, from whence I fear she must be moved to a 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 friend; 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! Mention nothing of poetry. I have destroyed every vestige of past vanities of that kind… 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!"

Coleridge responded to this appeal for sympathy and comfort by the following, – the only letter of his to Lamb which has been preserved: —

"Your letter, my friend, struck me with a mighty horror. It rushed upon me and stupified my feelings. You bid me write you a religious letter; I am not a man who would attempt to insult the greatness of your anguish by any other consolation. Heaven knows that in the easiest fortunes there is much dissatisfaction and weariness of spirit; much that calls for the exercise of patience and resignation; but in storms like these that shake the dwelling and make the heart tremble, there is no middle way between despair and the yielding up of the whole spirit to the guidance of faith. And surely it is a matter of joy that your faith in Jesus has been preserved; the Comforter that should relieve you is not far from you. But as you are a Christian, in the name of that Saviour who was filled with bitterness and made drunken with wormwood, I conjure you to have recourse in frequent prayer to 'his God and your God,' the God of mercies and Father of all comfort. Your poor father is, I hope, almost senseless of the calamity; the unconscious instrument of Divine Providence knows it not, and your mother is in Heaven. It is sweet to be roused from a frightful dream by the song of birds, and the gladsome rays of the morning. Ah, how infinitely more sweet to be awakened from the blackness and amazement of a sudden horror by the glories of God manifest, and the hallelujahs of angels.

"As to what regards yourself, I approve altogether of your abandoning what you justly call vanities. I look upon you as a man called by sorrow and anguish and a strange desolation of hopes into quietness, and a soul set apart and made peculiar to God; we cannot arrive at any portion of heavenly bliss without, in some measure, imitating Christ. And they arrive at the largest inheritance who imitate the most difficult parts of his character, and, bowed down and crushed under foot, cry, in fulness of faith, 'Father, Thy will be done.'

"I wish above measure to have you for a little while here; no visitants shall blow on the nakedness of your feelings; you shall be quiet, that your spirit may be healed. I see no possible objection, unless your father's helplessness prevent you, and unless you are necessary to him. If this be not the case, I charge you write me that you will come.

"I charge you, my dearest friend, not to dare to encourage gloom or despair; you are a temporary sharer in human miseries, that you may be an eternal partaker of the Divine nature. I charge you, if by any means it be possible, come to me."

How the storm was weathered, with what mingled fortitude and sweetness Lamb sustained the wrecked household and rescued his sister, when reason returned, from the living death of perpetual confinement in a mad-house must be read in the answer to Coleridge: —

"Your letter was an inestimable treasure to me. It will be a comfort to you, I know, to know that our prospects are somewhat brighter. 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 passed, 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 fit of frenzy and the terrible guilt of a mother's murder. I have seen her. I found her this morning, calm and serene; far, very far from an indecent forgetful serenity. She has a most affectionate and tender concern for what has happened. Indeed, from the beginning – frightful and hopeless as her disorder seemed – I had confidence enough in her strength of mind and religious principle, to look forward to a time when even she might recover tranquillity. God be praised, Coleridge! wonderful as it is to tell, I have never once been otherwise than collected and calm; even on the dreadful day, and in the midst of the terrible scene, I preserved a tranquillity which bystanders may have construed into indifference; a tranquillity not of despair. Is it folly or sin in me to say that it was a religious principle that most supported me? I allow much to other favourable circumstances. I felt that I had something else to do than to regret.

On that first evening my aunt was lying insensible – to all appearance like one dying; my father, with his poor forehead plaistered over from a wound he had received from a daughter, dearly loved by him and who loved him no less dearly; my mother a dead and murdered corpse in the next room; yet was I wonderfully supported. I closed not my eyes in sleep that night, but lay without terrors and without despair. I have lost no sleep since. I had been long used not to rest in things of sense; had endeavoured after a comprehension of mind unsatisfied with the 'ignorant present time,' and this kept me up. I had the whole weight of the family thrown on me; for my brother, little disposed (I speak not without tenderness for him) at any time to take care of old age and infirmities, had now, with his bad leg, an exemption from such duties, and I was left alone. One little incident may serve to make you understand my way of managing my mind. Within a day or two after the fatal one, we dressed for dinner a tongue, which we had had salted for some weeks in the house. As I sat down a feeling like remorse struck me: this tongue poor Mary got for me, and can I partake of it now when she is far away? A thought occurred and relieved me: if I give in to this way of feeling, there is not a chair, a room, an object in our rooms that will not awaken the keenest griefs. I must rise above such weaknesses. I hope this was not want of true feeling. I did not let this carry me, though, too far. On the very second day (I date from the day of horrors) as is usual in such cases there were a matter of twenty people, I do think, supping in our room; they prevailed on me to eat *with them* (for to eat I never refused). They were all making merry in the room! Some had come from friendship, some from busy curiosity and some from interest. I was going to partake with them when my recollection came that my poor dead mother was lying in the next room – the very next room; a mother who, through life, wished nothing but her children's welfare. Indignation, the rage of grief, something like remorse, rushed upon my mind. In an agony of emotion I found my way mechanically to the adjoining room and fell on my knees by the side of her coffin, asking forgiveness of Heaven and sometimes of her for forgetting her so soon. Tranquillity returned and it was the only violent emotion that mastered me. I think it did me good.

"I mention these things because I hate concealment and love to give a faithful journal of what passes within me. Our friends have been very good. Sam Le Grice [an old schoolfellow well known to the readers of Lamb], who was then in town, was with me the first three or four days and was as a brother to me; gave up every hour of his time, to the very hurting of his health and spirits, in constant attendance and humouring my poor father, talked with him, read to him, played at cribbage with him (for so short is the old man's recollection that he was playing at cards as though nothing had happened while the coroner's inquest was sitting over the way!). Samuel wept tenderly when he went away, for his mother wrote him a very severe letter on his loitering so long in town and he was forced to go. Mr. Norris of Christ's Hospital has been as a father to me; Mrs. Norris as a mother; though we had few claims on them. A gentleman, brother to my godmother, from whom we never had right or reason to expect any such assistance, sent my father twenty pounds; and to crown all these God's blessings to our family at such a time, an old lady, a cousin of my father and aunt, a gentlewoman of fortune, is to take my aunt and make her comfortable for the short remainder of her days. My aunt is recovered and as well as ever and highly pleased at the thought of going, and has generously given up the interest of her little money (which was formerly paid my father for her board) wholly and solely to my sister's use. Reckoning this we have, Daddy and I, for our two selves and an old maid-servant to look after him when I am out which will be necessary, £170 (or £180 rather) a year, out of which we can spare £50 or £60, at least, for Mary while she stays at Islington where she must and shall stay during her father's life, for his and her comfort. I know John will make speeches about it, but she shall not go into an hospital. The good lady of the mad-house and her daughter, an elegant, sweet-behaved young lady, love her and are taken with her amazingly; and I know, from her own mouth, she loves them and longs to be with them as much. Poor thing, they say she was but the other morning saying she knew she must go to Bethlem for life; that one of her brothers would have it so, but the other would wish it not, but be obliged to go with the stream; that she had often, as she passed Bethlem,

thought it likely 'Here it may be my fate to end my days,' conscious of a certain flightiness in her poor head often-times and mindful of more than one severe illness of that nature before. A legacy of £100 which my father will have at Christmas and this £20 I mentioned before with what is in the house will much more than set us clear. If my father, an old servant-maid and I can't live and live comfortably on £130 or £120 a year, we ought to burn by slow fires, and I almost would that Mary might not go into an hospital. Let me not leave one unfavourable impression on your mind respecting my brother. Since this has happened he has been very kind and brotherly; but I fear for his mind: he has taken his ease in the world and is not fit to struggle with difficulties, nor has he much accustomed himself to throw himself into their way and I know his language is already, 'Charles you must take care of yourself, you must not abridge yourself of a single pleasure you have been used to,' &c. &c., and in that style of talking. But you, a necessarian, can respect a difference of mind and love what is amiable in a character not perfect. He has been very good but I fear for his mind. Thank God I can unconnect myself with him and shall manage all my father's moneys in future myself if I take charge of Daddy, which poor John has not even hinted a wish at any future time even to share with me. The lady at this mad-house assures me that I may dismiss immediately both doctor and apothecary, retaining occasionally a composing draught or so for a while; and there is a less expensive establishment in her house, where she will only not have a room and nurse to herself for £50 or guineas a year – the outside would be £60. You know by economy how much more even I shall be able to spare for her comforts. She will, I fancy, if she stays, make one of the family rather than of the patients; and the old and young ladies I like exceedingly and she loves them dearly; and they, as the saying is, take to her very extraordinarily if it is extraordinary that people who see my sister should love her. Of all the people I ever saw in the world, my poor sister was most and thoroughly devoid of the least tincture of selfishness. I will enlarge upon her qualities, poor dear, dearest soul, in a future letter for my own comfort, for I understand her thoroughly; and, if I mistake not, in the most trying situation that a human being can be found in, she will be found (I speak not with sufficient humility, I fear), but humanly and foolishly speaking, she will be found, I trust, uniformly great and amiable…"

The depth and tenderness of Mary's but half requited love for her mother and the long years of daily and nightly devotion to her which had borne witness to it and been the immediate cause of the catastrophe, took the sting out of her grief and gave her an unfaltering sense of innocence. They even shed round her a peaceful atmosphere which veiled from her mind's eye the dread scene in all its naked horror, as it would seem from Lamb's next letter: —

"Mary continues serene and cheerful. I have not by me a little letter she wrote to me; for though I see her almost every day yet we delight to write to one another, for we can scarce see each other but in company with some of the people of the house. I have not the letter by me but will quote from memory what she wrote in it: 'I have no bad, terrifying dreams. At midnight, when I happen to awake, the nurse sleeping by the side of me, with the noise of the poor mad people around me, I have no fear. The spirit of my mother seems to descend and smile upon me and bid me live to enjoy the life and reason which the Almighty has given me. I shall see her again in heaven; she will then understand me better. My grandmother, too, will understand me better, and will then say no more as she used to do, 'Polly, what are those poor, crazy, moythered brains of yours thinking of always?'"

And again, in another of her little letters, not itself preserved, but which Charles translated "almost literally," he tells us, into verse, she said: —

Thou and I, dear friend,
With filial recognition sweet, shall know
One day the face of our dear mother in heaven;
And her remembered looks of love shall greet
With answering looks of love, her placid smiles
Meet with a smile as placid, and her hand

With drops of fondness wet, nor fear repulse.

And after speaking, in words already quoted, of how his mother "had never understood Mary right," Lamb continues: —

"Every act of duty and of love she could pay, every kindness (and I speak true when I say to the hurting of her health, and most probably in great part to the derangement of her senses), through a long course of infirmities and sickness, she could show her she ever did." "I will, some day as I promised, enlarge to you upon my sister's excellences; 'twill seem like exaggeration, but I will do it."

Although Mary's recovery had been rapid, to be permitted to return home was, for the present, out of the question; so cheered by constant intercourse with Charles she set herself, with characteristic sweetness, to make the best of life in a private lunatic asylum. "I have satisfaction," Charles tells his unfailing sympathiser Coleridge, "in being able to bid you rejoice with me in my sister's continued reason and composedness of mind. Let us both be thankful for it. I continue to visit her very frequently and the people of the house are vastly indulgent to her. She is likely to be as comfortably situated in all respects as those who pay twice or thrice the sum. They love her and she loves them and makes herself very useful to them. Benevolence sets out on her journey with a good heart and puts a good face on it, but is apt to limp and grow feeble unless she calls in the aid of self-interest by way of crutch. In Mary's case, as far as respects those she is with, 'tis well that these principles are so likely to co-operate. I am rather at a loss sometimes for books for her, our reading is somewhat confined and we have nearly exhausted our London library. She has her hands too full of work to read much, but a little she must read for reading was her daily bread."

So wore away the remaining months of this dark year. Perhaps they were loneliest and saddest for Charles. There was no one now to share with him the care of his old father; and second childhood draws unsparingly on the debt of filial affection and gratitude. Cheerfully and ungrudgingly did he pay it. His chief solace was the correspondence with Coleridge; and, as his spirits recovered their tone, the mutual discussion of the poems which the two friends were about to publish conjointly with some of Charles Lloyd's, was resumed. The little volume was to be issued by Cottle of Bristol, early in the coming year, 1797; and Lamb was desirous to seize the occasion of giving his sister an unlooked-for pleasure and of consecrating his verses by a renouncement and a dedication.

"I have a dedication in my head," he writes, "for my few things, which I want to know if you approve of and can insert. I mean to inscribe them to my sister. It will be unexpected, and it will give her pleasure; or do you think it will look whimsical at all? As I have not spoken to her about it, I can easily reject the idea. But there is a monotony in the affections which people living together, or, as we do now, very frequently seeing each other, are apt to get into; a sort of indifference in the expression of kindness for each other, which demands that we should sometimes call to our aid the trickery of surprise. The title page to stand thus: —

POEMS

BY

CHARLES LAMB, OF THE INDIA HOUSE

Motto: —

This beauty, in the blossom of my youth,

When my first fire knew no adulterate incense,
Nor I no way to flatter but my fondness,
In the best language my true tongue could tell me,
And all the broken sighs my sick heart lend me,
I sued and served. Long did I love this lady. – Massinger.

The Dedication: —

THE FEW FOLLOWING POEMS,

CREATURES OF THE FANCY AND THE FEELING,

IN LIFE'S MORE VACANT HOURS,

PRODUCED, FOR THE MOST PART, BY

LOVE IN IDLENESS,

ARE,

WITH ALL A BROTHER'S FONDNESS,

INSCRIBED TO

MARY ANNE LAMB,

THE AUTHOR'S BEST FRIEND AND SISTER

"This is the pomp and paraphernalia of parting, with which I take my leave of a passion which has reigned so royally, so long, within me. Thus, with its trappings of laureateship, I fling it off, pleased and satisfied with myself that the weakness troubles me no longer. I am wedded, Coleridge, to the fortunes of my sister and my poor old father. Oh, my friend! I think, sometimes, could I recall the days that are past, which among them should I choose? Not those merrier days, not the pleasant days of hope, not those wanderings with a fair-haired maid which I have so often and so feelingly regretted, but the days, Coleridge, of a *mother's* fondness for her *school-boy*. What would I give to call her back to earth for *one* day! – on my knees to ask her pardon for all those little asperities of temper which, from time to time, have given her gentle spirit pain! – and the day, my friend, I trust will come.

There will be 'time enough' for kind offices of love, if Heaven's 'eternal year' be ours. Hereafter, her meek spirit shall not reproach me. Oh! my friend, cultivate the filial feelings! and let no man think himself released from the kind 'charities' of relationship: these shall give him peace at the last; these are the best foundation for every species of benevolence. I rejoice to hear by certain channels, that you, my friend, are reconciled with all your relations. 'Tis the most kindly and natural species of love, and we have all the associated train of early feelings to secure its strength and perpetuity."

CHAPTER III

Death of Aunt Hetty. – Mary removed from the Asylum. – Charles Lloyd. – A Visit to Nether Stowey, and Introduction to Wordsworth and his Sister. – Anniversary of the Mother's Death. – Mary ill again. – Estrangement between Lamb and Coleridge. – Speedy Reconcilement

1797-1801. – Æt. 33-37

Aunt Hetty did not find her expectations of a comfortable home realised under the roof of the wealthy gentlewoman, who proved herself a typical rich relation and wrote to Charles at the beginning of the new year that she found her aged cousin indolent and mulish, "and that her attachment to us" (he is telling Coleridge the tale, to whom he could unburthen his heart on all subjects, sure of sympathy) "is so strong that she can never be happy apart. The lady with delicate irony remarks that if I am not an hypocrite I shall rejoice to receive her again; and that it will be a means of making me more fond of home to have so dear a friend to come home to! The fact is, she is jealous of my aunt's bestowing any kind recollections on us while she enjoys the patronage of her roof. She says she finds it inconsistent with her own 'ease and tranquillity' to keep her any longer; and, in fine, summons me to fetch her home. Now, much as I should rejoice to transplant the poor old creature from the chilling air of such patronage, yet I know how straitened we are already, how unable already to answer any demand which sickness or any extraordinary expense may make. I know this; and all unused as I am to struggle with perplexities, I am somewhat nonplussed, to say no worse."

Hetty Lamb found a refuge and a welcome in the old humble home again. But she returned only to die; and Mary was not there to nurse her. She was still in the asylum at Islington; and was indeed herself at this time recovering from an attack of scarlet fever, or something akin to it.

Early in January 1797 Lamb wrote to Coleridge: – "You and Sara are very good to think so kindly and so favourably of poor Mary. I would to God all did so too. But I very much fear she must not think of coming home in my father's lifetime. It is very hard upon her, but our circumstances are peculiar and we must submit to them. God be praised she is so well as she is. She bears her situation as one who has no right to complain. My poor old aunt, whom you have seen, the kindest goodest creature to me when I was at school, who used to toddle there to bring me good things when I, school-boy like, only despised her for it, and used to be ashamed to see her come and sit herself down on the old coal-hole steps as you went into the old Grammar School and open her apron and bring out her basin with some nice thing she had caused to be saved for me, – the good old creature is now lying on her death-bed. I cannot bear to think on her deplorable state. To the shock she received on that our evil day from which she never completely recovered, I impute her illness. She says, poor thing, she is glad she is come home to die with me, I was always her favourite."

She lingered a month, and then went to occupy

> "… the same grave bed
> Where the dead mother lies.
> Oh, my dear mother! oh, thou dear dead saint!
> Where's now that placid face, where oft hath sat
> A mother's smile to think her son should thrive
> In this bad world when she was dead and gone;

And where a tear hath sat (take shame, O son!)
When that same child has proved himself unkind.
One parent yet is left – a wretched thing,
A sad survivor of his buried wife,
A palsy-smitten childish old, old man,
A semblance most forlorn of what he was."

"I own I am thankful that the good creature has ended her days of suffering and infirmity," says Lamb to Coleridge. "Good God! who could have foreseen all this but four months back! I had reckoned, in particular, on my aunt's living many years; she was a very hearty old woman… But she was a mere skeleton before she died; looked more like a corpse that had lain weeks in the grave than one fresh dead."

"I thank you; from my heart, I thank you," Charles again wrote to Coleridge, "for your solicitude about my sister. She is quite well, but must not, I fear, come to live with us yet a good while. In the first place, because it would hurt her and hurt my father for them to be together; secondly, from a regard to the world's good report; for I fear tongues will be busy whenever that event takes place. Some have hinted, one man has pressed it on me, that she should be in perpetual confinement. What she hath done to deserve, or the necessity of such an hardship I see not; do you?"

At length Lamb determined to grapple, on Mary's behalf, with the difficulties and embarrassments of the situation. "Painful doubts were suggested," says Talfourd, "by the authorities of the parish where the terrible occurrence happened, whether they were not bound to institute proceedings which must have placed her for life at the disposition of the Crown, especially as no medical assurance could be given against the probable recurrence of dangerous frenzy. But Charles came to her deliverance; he satisfied all the parties who had power to oppose her release, by his solemn engagement that he would take her under his care for life; and he kept his word. Whether any communication with the Home Secretary occurred before her release I have been unable to ascertain. It was the impression of Mr. Lloyd, from whom my own knowledge of the circumstances, which the letters do not contain was derived, that a communication took place, on which a similar pledge was given. At all events the result was that she left the asylum and took up her abode," not with her brother yet, but in lodgings near him and her father.

He writes to Coleridge, April 7th, 1797: "Lloyd may have told you about my sister… If not, I have taken her out of her confinement, and taken a room for her at Hackney, and spend my Sundays, holidays, &c., with her. She boards herself. In a little half year's illness and in such an illness, of such a nature and of such consequences, to get her out into the world again, with a prospect of her never being so ill again, this is to be ranked not among the common blessings of Providence. May that merciful God make tender my heart and make me as thankful as, in my distress, I was earnest in my prayers. Congratulate me on an ever-present and never alienable friend like her, and do, do insert, if you have not *lost*, my dedication [to Mary]. It will have lost half its value by coming so late." And of another sonnet to her, which he desires to have inserted, he says: "I wish to accumulate perpetuating tokens of my affection to poor Mary."

Two events which brightened this sad year must not be passed over though Mary, the sharer of all her brother's joys and sorrows, had but an indirect participation in them. Just when he was most lonely and desolate at the close of the fatal year he had written to Coleridge: "I can only converse with you by letter, and with the dead in their books. My sister, indeed, is all I can wish in a companion; but our spirits are alike poorly, our reading and knowledge from the self-same sources, our communication with the scenes of the world alike narrow. Never having kept separate company or any 'company' *together*– never having read separate books and few books *together*, what knowledge have we to convey to each other? In our little range of duties and connections how few sentiments can take place without friends, with few books, with a taste for religion rather than a strong religious

habit! We need some support, some leading-strings to cheer and direct us. You talk very wisely and be not sparing of *your advice*; continue to remember us and to show us you do remember; we will take as lively an interest in what concerns you and yours. All I can add to your happiness will be sympathy; you can add to mine *more*, you can teach me wisdom."

Quite suddenly, at the beginning of the new year, there came to break this solitude Charles Lloyd, whose poems were to company Lamb's own and Coleridge's in the forthcoming volume: a young man of quaker family who was living in close fellowship with that group of poets down in Somersetshire towards whom Lamb's eyes and heart were wistfully turned as afterwards were to be those of all lovers of literature. How deeply he was moved by this spontaneous seeking for his friendship on Lloyd's part, let a few lines from one of those early poems which, in their earnest simplicity and sincerity, are precious autobiographic fragments tell: —

Alone, obscure, without a friend,
A cheerless, solitary thing,
Why seeks my Lloyd the stranger out?
What offering can the stranger bring
Of social scenes, home-bred delights,
That him in aught compensate may
For Stowey's pleasant winter nights,
For loves and friendships far away?

*****

For this a gleam of random joy,
Hath flush'd my unaccustom'd cheek,
And with an o'ercharged bursting heart
I feel the thanks I cannot speak.
O sweet are all the Muses' lays,
And sweet the charm of matin bird —
'Twas long since these estranged ears
The sweeter voice of friend had heard.

The next was a yet brighter gleam – a fortnight with Coleridge at Nether Stowey and an introduction to Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy, forerunner of a life-long friendship in which Mary was soon to share. The visit took place in the July of this same year 1797. The prospect of it had dangled tantalizingly before Charles' eyes for a year or more; and now at last his chiefs at the India House were propitious and he wrote: "May I, can I, shall I come so soon?.. I long, I yearn, with all the longings of a child do I desire to see you, to come among you, to see the young philosopher [Hartley, the poet's first child] to thank Sara for her last year's invitation in person, to read your tragedy, to read over together our little book, to breathe fresh air, to revive in me vivid images of '*Salutation scenery*.' There is a sort of sacrilege in my letting such ideas slip out of my mind and memory… Here I will leave off, for I dislike to fill up this paper (which involves a question so connected with my heart and soul) with meaner matter, or subjects to me less interesting. I can talk as I can think, nothing else."

Seldom has fate been kind enough to bring together, in those years of early manhood when friendships strike their deepest roots, just the very men who could give the best help, the warmest encouragement to each other's genius, whilst they were girding themselves for that warfare with the ignorance and dulness of the public which every original man has to wage for a longer or shorter

time. Wordsworth was twenty-seven, Coleridge twenty-five, Lamb twenty-two. For Wordsworth was to come the longest, stiffest battle – fought, however, from the vantage ground of pecuniary independence, thanks to his simple frugal habits and to a few strokes of good fortune. His aspect in age is familiar to the readers of this generation, but less so the Wordsworth of the days when the *Lyrical Ballads* were just taking final shape. There was already a severe worn pressure of thought about the temples of his high yet somewhat narrow forehead and 'his eyes were fires, half smouldering, half burning, inspired, supernatural, with a fixed acrid gaze' as if he saw something in objects more than the outward appearance. 'His cheeks were furrowed by strong purpose and feeling, and there was a convulsive inclination to laughter about the mouth, a good deal at variance with the solemn, stately expression of the rest of his face.' Dressed in a brown fustian jacket and striped pantaloons, adds Hazlitt, who first saw him a few months later, he had something of a roll and lounge in his gait not unlike his own Peter Bell. He talked freely and naturally, with a mixture of clear gushing accents in his voice, a deep guttural intonation and a strong tincture of the northern burr, and when he recited one of his poems his voice lingered on the ear "like the roll of spent thunder."

But who could dazzle and win like Coleridge? Who could travel so far and wide through all the realms of thought and imagination, and pour out the riches he brought back in such free, full, melodious speech with that spontaneous "utterancy of heart and soul," which was his unique gift, in a voice whose tones were so sweet, ear and soul were alike ravished? For him the fight was not so much with the public which, Orpheus that he was, he could so easily have led captive, as with the flesh – weak health, a nerveless languor, a feeble will that never could combine and concentrate his forces for any sustained or methodical effort. Dorothy Wordsworth has described him as he looked in these days: "At first I thought him very plain – that is, for about three minutes – he is pale, thin, has a wide mouth, thick lips, and not very good teeth, longish loose-growing, half-curling, rough black hair (in both these respects a contrast to Wordsworth, who had, in his youth, beautiful teeth and light brown hair); but if you hear him speak for five minutes, you think no more of them. His eye is large and full and not very dark, but grey, such an eye as would receive from a heavy soul the dullest expression; but it speaks every emotion of his animated mind; it has more of the 'poet's eye in a fine frenzy rolling' than I ever witnessed. He has fine dark eye-brows and an overhanging forehead." This was the very year that produced *The Ancient Mariner*, the first part of *Christabel*, and *Kubla Khan*.

To Charles Lamb the change from his restricted over-shadowed life in London – all day at a clerk's desk and in the evening a return to the Pentonville lodging with no other inmate than his poor old father, Sundays and holidays only spent with his sister – to such companionship amid such scenes, almost dazed him, like stepping from a darkened room into the brilliant sunshine. Before he went he had written: – "I see nobody. I sit and read, or walk alone and hear nothing. I am quite lost to conversation from disuse; and out of the sphere of my little family (who, I am thankful, are dearer and dearer to me every day), I see no face that brightens up at my approach. My friends are at a distance. Worldly hopes are at a low ebb with me, and unworldly thoughts are unfamiliar to me, though I occasionally indulge in them. Still I feel a calm not unlike content. I fear it is sometimes more akin to physical stupidity than to a heaven-flowing serenity and peace. If I come to Stowey, what conversation can I furnish to compensate my friend for those stores of knowledge and of fancy, those delightful treasures of wisdom, which I know he will open to me? But it is better to give than to receive; and I was a very patient hearer and docile scholar in our winter evening meetings at Mr. May's, was I not Coleridge? What I have owed to thee my heart can ne'er forget."

Perhaps his friends, even Coleridge who knew him so well, realised as little as himself what was the true mental stature of the "gentle-hearted", and "wild-eyed boy" as they called him; whose opportunities and experience, save in the matter of strange calamity, had been so narrow compared to their own. The keen edge of his discernment as a critic, quick and piercing as those quick, piercing, restless eyes of his, they knew and prized yet could hardly, perhaps, divine that there were qualities in him which would freight his prose for a long voyage down the stream of time. But already they

knew that within that small spare frame, "thin and wiry as an Arab of the desert," there beat a heroic heart, fit to meet the stern and painful exigencies of his lot; and that his love for his sister was of the same fibre as conscience – "a supreme embracer of consequences."

Dorothy Wordsworth was just such a friend and comrade to the poet as Mary was to Charles, sharing his passionate devotion to nature as Mary shared her brother's loves, whether for men or books or for the stir and throng of life in the great city. Alike were these two women in being as De Quincey said of Dorothy "the truest, most inevitable and, at the same time, the quickest and readiest in sympathy with either joy or sorrow, with laughter or with tears, with the realities of life, or the larger realities of the poets." But unlike in temperament; Dorothy ardent, fiery, trembling with eager impetuosity that embarrassed her utterance; Mary gentle, silent, or deliberate in speech. In after life, there was another sad similarity for Dorothy's reason, too, was in the end over-clouded. Coleridge has described her as she then was: "She is a woman indeed," said he, "in mind, I mean, and in heart; for her person is such that if you expected to see a pretty woman, you would think her ordinary; if you expected to see an ordinary woman, you would think her pretty; but her manners are simple, ardent, and impressive. In every motion her innocent soul outbeams so brightly, that who saw her would say 'guilt was a thing impossible with her.' Her information various, her eye watchful in minute observation of nature, and her taste a perfect electrometer."

An accident had lamed Coleridge the very morning after Lamb's arrival, so that he was unable to share his friends' walks. He turned his imprisonment to golden account by writing a poem which mirrors for us, as in a still lake, the beauty of the Quantock hills and vales where they were roaming, the scenes amid which these great and happy days of youth and poetry and friendship were passed. It is the very poem in the margin of which, eight and thirty years afterwards, Coleridge on his death-bed wrote down the sum of his love for Charles and Mary Lamb.

THIS LIME-TREE BOWER MY PRISON

Well, they are gone, and here must I remain,
This lime-tree bower my prison! I have lost
Beauties and feelings such as would have been
Most sweet to my remembrance even when age
Had dimmed mine eyes to blindness! They, meanwhile,
Friends whom I never more may meet again
On springy heath, along the hill-top edge
Wander in gladness and wind down, perchance,
To that still roaring dell of which I told;
The roaring dell, o'erwooded, narrow, deep,
And only speckled by the mid-day sun;
Where its slim trunk the ash, from rock to rock
Flings arching like a bridge; – that branchless ash,
Unsunned and damp, whose few poor yellow leaves
Ne'er tremble in the gale, yet tremble still,
Fanned by the water-fall! and there my friends
Behold the dark green file of long, lank weeds,
That all at once (a most fantastic sight!)
Still nod and drip beneath the dripping edge
Of the blue clay-stone.
Now, my friends emerge
Beneath the wide wide heaven – and view again

The many-steepled tract magnificent
Of hilly fields and meadows, and the sea,
With some fair bark, perhaps, whose sails light up
The slip of smooth clear blue betwixt two Isles
Of purple shadow! 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! Ah! slowly sink
Behind the western ridge, thou glorious sun!
Shine in the slant beams of the sinking orb,
Ye purple heath-flowers! richlier burn ye clouds!
Live in the yellow light, ye distant groves!
And kindle, thou blue ocean! So my Friend,
Struck with deep joy may stand, as I have stood,
Silent with swimming sense; yea, gazing round
On the wide landscape, gaze till all doth seem
Less gross than bodily; and of such hues
As veil the Almighty Spirit, when yet he makes
Spirits perceive His presence…

*****

On Lamb's return, he wrote in the same modest vein as before —

"I am scarcely yet so reconciled to the loss of you or so subsided into my wonted uniformity of feeling as to sit calmly down to think of you and write… Is the patriot [Thelwall] come? Are Wordsworth and his sister gone yet? I was looking out for John Thelwall all the way from Bridgewater and had I met him I think it would have moved me almost to tears. You will oblige me, too, by sending me my great-coat which I left behind in the oblivious state the mind is thrown into at parting. Is it not ridiculous that I sometimes envy that great-coat lingering so cunningly behind! At present I have none; so send it me by a Stowey waggon if there be such a thing, directing it for C. L., No. 45, Chapel Street, Pentonville, near London. But above all, *that inscription* [of Wordsworth's]. It will recall to me the tones of all your voices, and with them many a remembered kindness to one who could and can repay you all only by the silence of a grateful heart. I could not talk much while I was with you but my silence was not sullenness nor I hope from any bad motive; but in truth, disuse has made me awkward at it. I know I behaved myself, particularly at Tom Poole's and at Cruikshank's most like a sulky child; but company and converse are strange to me. It was kind in you all to endure me as you did.

"Are you and your dear Sara – to me also very dear because very kind – agreed yet about the management of little Hartley? And how go on the little rogue's teeth?"

The mention of his address in the foregoing letter, shows that Lamb and his father had already quitted Little Queen Street. It is probable that they did so, indeed, immediately after the great tragedy; to escape, not only from the painful associations of the spot but also from the cruel curiosity which its terrible notoriety must have drawn upon them. The season was coming round which could not but renew his and Mary's grief and anguish in the recollection of that "day of horrors." "Friday next, Coleridge," he writes, "is the day (September 22nd) on which my mother died;" and in the letter is enclosed that beautiful and affecting poem beginning: —

Alas! how am I changed? Where be the tears,
The sobs, and forced suspensions of the breath,
And all the dull desertions of the heart,
With which I hung o'er my dead mother's corse?
Where be the blest subsidings of the storm
Within? The sweet resignedness of hope
Drawn heavenward, and strength of filial love
In which I bowed me to my Father's will?

*****

Mary's was a silent grief. But those few casual pathetic words written years afterwards speak her life-long sorrow, – "my dear mother who, though you do not know it, is always in my poor head and heart." She continued quiet in her lodgings, free from relapse till toward the end of the year.

On the 10th December Charles wrote in bad spirits, – "My teasing lot makes me too confused for a clear judgment of things; too selfish for sympathy… My sister is pretty well, thank God. We think of you very often. God bless you. Continue to be my correspondent, and I will strive to fancy that this world is *not* 'all barrenness.'"

But by Christmas Day she was once more in the asylum. In sad solitude he gave utterance, again in verse form, to his overflowing grief and love: —

I am a widow'd thing now thou art gone!
Now thou art gone, my own familiar friend,
Companion, sister, helpmate, counsellor!
Alas! that honour'd mind whose sweet reproof
And meekest wisdom in times past have smooth'd
The unfilial harshness of my foolish speech,
And made me loving to my parents old
(Why is this so, ah God! why is this so?)
That honour'd mind become a fearful blank,
Her senses lock'd up, and herself kept out
From human sight or converse, while so many
Of the foolish sort are left to roam at large,
Doing all acts of folly and sin and shame?
Thy paths are mystery!
Yet I will not think
Sweet friend, but we shall one day meet and live
In quietness and die so, fearing God.
Or if *not*, and these false suggestions be
A fit of the weak nature, loth to part
With what it loved so long and held so dear;
If thou art to be taken and I left
(More sinning, yet unpunish'd save in thee,)
It is the will of God, and we are clay
In the potter's hand; and at the worst are made
From absolute nothing, vessels of disgrace,
Till His most righteous purpose wrought in us,

Our purified spirits find their perfect rest.

To add to these sorrows Coleridge had, for some time, been growing negligent as a correspondent. So early as April Lamb had written, after affectionate enquiries for Hartley "the minute philosopher" and Hartley's mother, – "Coleridge, I am not trifling, nor are these matter-of-fact questions only. You are all very dear and precious to me. Do what you will, Coleridge, you may hurt and vex me by your silence but you cannot estrange my heart from you all. I cannot scatter friendships like chuck-farthings, nor let them drop from mine hand like hour-glass sand. I have but two or three people in the world to whom I am more than indifferent and I can't afford to whistle them off to the winds."

And again, three months after his return from Stowey, he wrote sorrowfully almost plaintively, remonstrating for Lloyd's sake and his own: —

"You use Lloyd very ill, never writing to him. I tell you again that his is not a mind with which you should play tricks. He deserves more tenderness from you. For myself, I must spoil a little passage of Beaumont and Fletcher's to adapt it to my feelings:

I am prouder
That I was once your friend, tho' now forgot,
Than to have had another true to me.

If you don't write to me now, as I told Lloyd, I shall get angry and call you hard names – 'Manchineel'" (alluding to a passage in a poem of Coleridge's, where he compares a false friend to the treacherous manchineel tree[1] which mingles its own venom with the rain and poisons him who rests beneath its shade) "and I don't know what else. I wish you would send me my great-coat. The snow and the rain season is at hand and I have but a wretched old coat, once my father's, to keep 'em off and that is transitory.

When time drives flocks from field to fold,
When ways grow foul and blood gets cold,

I shall remember where I left my coat. Meet emblem wilt thou be, old Winter, of a friend's neglect – cold, cold, cold!"

But this fresh stroke of adversity, sweeping away the fond hope Charles had begun to cherish that "Mary would never be so ill again," roused his friend's sometimes torpid but deep and enduring affection for him into action. "You have writ me many kind letters, and I have answered none of them," says Lamb, on the 28th of January 1798. "I don't deserve your attentions. An unnatural indifference has been creeping on me since my last misfortunes or I should have seized the first opening of a correspondence with you. These last afflictions, Coleridge, have failed to soften and bend my will. They found me unprepared… I have been very querulous, impatient under the rod – full of little jealousies and heart-burnings. I had well-nigh quarrelled with Charles Lloyd; and for no other reason, I believe, than that the good creature did all he could to make me happy. The truth is I thought he tried to force my mind from its natural and proper bent. He continually wished me to be from home; he was drawing me *from* the consideration of my poor dear Mary's situation rather than assisting me to gain a proper view of it with religious consolations. I wanted to be left to the tendency of my own mind in a solitary state which in times past, I knew, had led to quietness and a patient bearing of the yoke. He was hurt that I was not more constantly with him; but he was living with White (Jem White, an old school-fellow, author of *Falstaff's Letters*), a man to whom I had never been accustomed to impart my

[1] *Hippomane Mancinella*, one of the *Euphorbiaceæ*, a native of South America.

dearest feelings though, from long habits of friendliness and many a social and good quality, I loved him very much. I met company there sometimes, indiscriminate company. Any society almost, when I am in affliction, is sorely painful to me. I seem to breathe more freely, to think more collectedly, to feel more properly and calmly when alone. All these things the good creature did with the kindest intentions in the world but they produced in me nothing but soreness and discontent. I became, as he complained, 'jaundiced' towards him … but he has forgiven me; and his smile, I hope, will draw all such humours from me. I am recovering, God be praised for it, a healthiness of mind, something like calmness; but I want more religion… Mary is recovering; but I see no opening yet of a situation for her. Your invitation went to my very heart; but you have a power of exciting interest, of leading all hearts captive, too forcible to admit of Mary's being with you. I consider her as perpetually on the brink of madness. I think you would almost make her dance within an inch of the precipice: she must be with duller fancies and cooler intellects. I know a young man of this description, who has suited her these twenty years, and may live to do so still, if we are one day restored to each other."

But the clouds gathered up again between the friends, generated partly by a kind of intellectual arrogance whereof Coleridge afterwards accused himself (he was often but too self-depreciatory in after life) which, in spite of Lamb's generous and unbounded admiration for his friend, did at last both irritate and hurt him; still more by the influence of Lloyd who, himself slighted as he fancied, and full of a morbid sensitiveness "bordering on derangement," sometimes indeed overleaping that border, worked upon Lamb's soreness of feeling till a brief estrangement ensued. Lamb had not yet learned to be on his guard with Lloyd. Years afterwards he wrote of him to Coleridge: "He is a sad tattler; but this is under the rose. Twenty years ago he estranged one friend from me quite, whom I have been regretting, but never could regain since. He almost alienated you also from me or me from you, I don't know which: but that breach is closed. The 'dreary sea' is filled up. He has lately been at work 'telling again,' as they call it, a most gratuitous piece of mischief, and has caused a coolness betwixt me and (not a friend but) an intimate acquaintance. I suspect, also, he saps Manning's faith in me who am to Manning more than an acquaintance."

The breach was closed, indeed, almost as soon as opened. But Coleridge went away to Germany for fourteen months and the correspondence was meanwhile suspended. When it was resumed Lamb was, in some respects, an altered man; he was passing from youth to maturity, enlarging the circle of his acquaintance and entering on more or less continuous literary work; whilst, on the other hand, the weaknesses which accompanied the splendid endowments of his friend were becoming but too plainly apparent; and though they never for a moment lessened Lamb's affection, nay, with his fine humanity seemed to give rather an added tenderness to it, there was inevitably a less deferential, a more humorous and playful tone on his side in their intercourse. "Bless you, old sophist who, next to human nature, taught me all the corruption I was capable of knowing," says he to the poet-philosopher by-and-by. And the weak side of his friend's style, too, received an occasional sly thrust; as for instance when on forwarding him some books he writes in 1800 "I detained *Statius* wilfully, out of a reverent regard to your style. *Statius* they tell me is turgid."

CHAPTER IV

Death of the Father. – Mary comes Home to live. – A Removal. – First Verses. – A Literary Tea-Party. – Another Move. – Friends increase

1799-1800. – Æt. 35-36

The feeble flame of life in Lamb's father flickered on for two years and a half after his wife's death. He was laid to rest at last beside her and his sister Hetty in the churchyard of St. Andrew's, Holborn (now swept away in the building of the Holborn Viaduct), on the 13th of April 1799, and Mary came home once more. There is no mention of either fact in Lamb's letters; for Coleridge was away in Germany; and with Southey, who was almost the sole correspondent of this year, the tie was purely intellectual and never even in that kind a close one. A significant allusion to Mary there is, however, in a letter to him dated May 20: "Mary was never in better health or spirits than now." But neither the happiness of sharing Charles's home again nor anything else could save her from the constant recurrence of her malady; nor, in these early days, from the painful notoriety of what had befallen her; and they were soon regarded as unwelcome inmates in the Chapel Street lodgings.

Early in 1800 be tells Coleridge: "Soon after I wrote to you last an offer was made me by Gutch (you must remember him at Christ's) to come and lodge with him at his house in Southampton Buildings, Chancery Lane. This was a very comfortable offer to me, the rooms being at a reasonable rent and including the use of an old servant, besides being infinitely preferable to ordinary lodgings *in our case* as you must perceive. As Gutch knew all our story and the perpetual liability to a recurrence in my sister's disorder, probably to the end of her life, I certainly think the offer very generous and very friendly. I have got three rooms (including servant) under £34 a year. Here I soon found myself at home, and here, in six weeks after, Mary was well enough to join me. So we are once more settled. I am afraid we are not placed out of the reach of future interruptions; but I am determined to take what snatches of pleasure we can, between the acts of our distressful drama. I have passed two days at Oxford, on a visit, which I have long put off, to Gutch's family. The sight of the Bodleian Library and, above all, a fine bust of Bishop Taylor at All Souls' were particularly gratifying to me. Unluckily it was not a family where I could take Mary with me, and I am afraid there is something of dishonesty in any pleasure I take without *her*. She never goes anywhere." And to Manning: "It is a great object to me to live in town." [Pentonville then too much of a gossiping country suburb!] "We can be nowhere private except in the midst of London."

By the summer Mary was not only quite well but making a first essay in verse – the theme, a playful mockery of her brother's boyish love for a pictured beauty at Blakesware described in his essay, – "that Beauty with the cool blue pastoral drapery and a lamb, that hung next the great bay window, with the bright yellow H – shire hair, and eye of watchet hue – so like my Alice! I am persuaded she was a true Elia – Mildred Elia, I take it. From her and from my passion for her – for I first learned love from a picture – Bridget took the hint of those pretty whimsical lines which thou mayest see if haply thou hast never seen them, reader, in the margin. But my Mildred grew not old like the imaginary Helen."

With brotherly pride he sends them to Coleridge: "How do you like this little epigram? It is not my writing, nor had I any finger in it. If you concur with me in thinking it very elegant and very original, I shall be tempted to name the author to you. I will just hint that it is almost or quite a first attempt: —

HELEN

High-born Helen, round your dwelling
These twenty years I've paced in vain;
Haughty beauty, thy lover's duty
Hath been to glory in his pain.

High-born Helen, proudly telling
Stories of thy cold disdain;
I starve, I die, now you comply,
And I no longer can complain.

These twenty years I've lived on tears,
Dwelling forever on a frown;
On sighs I've fed, your scorn my bread;
I perish now you kind are grown.

Can I who loved my beloved,
But for the scorn "was in her eye";
Can I be moved for my beloved,
When she "returns me sigh for sigh"?

In stately pride, by my bed-side
High-born Helen's portrait's hung;
Deaf to my praise, my mournful lays
Are nightly to the portrait sung.

To that I weep, nor ever sleep,
Complaining all night long to her.
Helen grown old, no longer cold.
Said, "You to all men I prefer."

Lamb inserted this and another by Mary, a serious and tender little poem, the *Dialogue between a Mother and Child* beginning

O lady, lay your costly robes aside,
No longer may you glory in your pride,

in the first collected edition of his works.

Mary now began also to go out with her brother, and the last record of this year in the Coleridge correspondence discloses them at a literary tea-party, not in the character of lions but only as friends of a lion – Coleridge – who had already become, in his frequent visits to town, the prey of some third-rate admiring literary ladies, notably of a certain Miss Wesley (niece of John Wesley) and of her friend Miss Benger, authoress of a *Life of Tobin*, &c.

"You blame us for giving your direction to Miss Wesley," says the letter; "the woman has been ten times after us about it and we gave it her at last, under the idea that no further harm would ensue, but that she would *once* write to you, and you would bite your lips and forget to answer it, and so

it would end. You read us a dismal homily upon 'Realities.' We know quite as well as you do what are shadows and what are realities. You, for instance, when you are over your fourth or fifth jorum, chirping about old school occurrences, are the best of realities. Shadows are cold, thin things that have no warmth or grasp in them. Miss Wesley and her friend and a tribe of authoresses that come after you here daily and, in defect of you, hive and cluster upon us, are the shadows. You encouraged that mopsey Miss Wesley to dance after you in the hope of having her nonsense put into a nonsensical anthology. We have pretty well shaken her off by that simple expedient of referring her to you, but there are more burs in the wind. I came home t'other day from business, hungry as a hunter, to dinner, with nothing, I am sure, of the author but *hunger* about me; and whom found I closeted with Mary but a friend of this Miss Wesley, one Miss Benjay or Benje … I just came in time enough, I believe, luckily to prevent them from exchanging vows of eternal friendship. It seems she is one of your authoresses that you first foster and then upbraid us with. But I forgive you. 'The rogue has given me potions to make me love him.' Well, go she would not nor step a step over our threshold till we had promised to come to drink tea with her next night. I had never seen her before and could not tell who the devil it was that was so familiar. We went, however, not to be impolite. Her lodgings are up two pair of stairs in East Street. Tea and coffee and macaroons – a kind of cake – much love. We sat down. Presently Miss Benjay broke the silence by declaring herself quite of a different opinion from *D'Israeli*, who supposes the differences of human intellect to be the mere effect of organization. She begged to know my opinion. I attempted to carry it off with a pun upon organ, but that went off very flat. She immediately conceived a very low opinion of my metaphysics; and turning round to Mary, put some question to her in French, possibly having heard that neither Mary nor I understood French. The explanation that took place occasioned some embarrassment and much wondering. She then fell into an insulting conversation about the comparative genius and merits of all modern languages and concluded with asserting that the Saxon was esteemed the purest dialect in Germany. From thence she passed into the subject of poetry where I, who had hitherto sat mute and a hearer only, humbly hoped I might now put in a word to some advantage, seeing that it was my own trade in a manner. But I was stopped by a round assertion that no good poetry had appeared since Dr. Johnson's time. It seems the doctor has suppressed many hopeful geniuses that way, by the severity of his critical strictures in his *Lives of the Poets*. I here ventured to question the fact and was beginning to appeal to *names* but I was assured 'it was certainly the case.' Then we discussed Miss More's [Hannah] book on education, which I had never read. It seems Dr. Gregory, another of Miss Benjay's friends, had found fault with one of Miss More's metaphors. Miss More has been at some pains to vindicate herself, in the opinion of Miss Benjay not without success. It seems the Doctor is invariably against the use of broken or mixed metaphor which he reprobates, against the authority of Shakspeare himself. We next discussed the question whether Pope was a poet? I find Dr. Gregory is of opinion he was not, though Miss Seward does not at all concur with him in this. We then sat upon the comparative merits of the ten translations of Pizarro and Miss Benjay or Benje advised Mary to take two of them home (she thought it might afford her some pleasure to compare them *verbatim*), which we declined. It being now nine o'clock, wine and macaroons were again served round, and we parted with a promise to go again next week and meet the Miss Porters who, it seems, have heard much of Mr. Coleridge and wish to see *us* because we are *his* friends. I have been preparing for the occasion. I crowd cotton in my ears. I read all the reviews and magazines of the past month against the dreadful meeting, and I hope by these means to cut a tolerable second-rate figure.

"… Take no thought about your proof-sheets; they shall be done as if Woodfall himself did them. Pray send us word of Mrs. Coleridge and little David Hartley, your little reality. Farewell, dear Substance. Take no umbrage at anything I have written.

"I am, and will be,

"Yours ever in sober sadness,

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.