

A HALF-HOUR WITH THE "SORRY PHENOMENA" IN
INNER TEMPLE LANE.



PERHAPS nothing, in even Froude's somewhat startling revelations, has done so much to convince us of the prejudice of Carlyle's character, as the epithet flung at two gentle spirits, leading their quiet unselfish lives in the "Temple"—Charles and Mary Lamb.

If, as some one has said: "The altar of sacrifice is the touch-stone of character," it is a matter of small surprise, that a man of Carlyle's calibre should have missed the key-note of Charles Lamb's life. We have reason to believe that neither ever would have succeeded in understanding the other. Armed with a thousand points of difference, unlike, even in humor, the one, full of quaint conceits, naive, at times almost fantastic; the other, uttering his prophetic incoherencies from a figurative *Pisgah*, grim, vindictive and *Hogarthian*—it is no wonder that both remained hopelessly enigmatical to the last. Then, Carlyle had the misfortune to belong to a nation, which Lamb confesses he "had been all his life trying to like," and his whimsical way of looking at men and things made Lamb impatient of the moral ram-rod element in the Scotch seer. He (Lamb) loved to dally with his subject—and dalliance is by no means characteristic of the Scotch; he loved to look at it on this side and on that, to suggest rather than to dogmatize. As we enter, in fancy, the dingy chambers in the "Inner Temple," so long the home of Charles and Mary Lamb, we are conscious of an absurd yearning to leave our shoes at the threshold. To our secular eyes, the charmed region beyond, seems a "place set apart" a kind of "Holy of Holies" sacred to the high priests of literature.

Our Jeffersonian independence however, (as indispensable to the average Yankee traveller as his button-book) is not to be routed on British soil. It triumphs and we enter, for a quiet half-hour's communion, with two gentle souls, who, in the uncertain half lights of the imagination seem to linger still among their "household gods."

In all literature, perhaps there are no two writers whose personality is more interesting to the world of readers than that of Charles Lamb and his sister Mary. As they were in life, so they are in our thought inseparable. Bound together by a thousand ties of love and sympathy; each knowing no joy unshared by the other; they seem to us, unique figures, as necessary to each other as the sunshine to the English daisy sprinkling the meadows of their beloved Hertfordshire. One feels that he cannot know them too intimately—that their lives will bear inspection and that no detail of dress, manner or thought, in so far as it is characteristic of our author, dwindles to the trite or uninteresting. Would we could delude ourselves with the thought, that this is true of the majority of those, whose pens have given us the best that is in them! But alas! Genius, exiled from Olympus, with collapsed wings and with the fires of inspiration smothered on the ashes of the commonplace, should be inspected through the wrong end of our intellectual spy-glass.

There is a pathos in Lamb's life, full as it is of self-immolation and devotion to his sister, which draws us to him as nothing else could. Mary, in one of her letters, gives us a charming picture of their quiet home life in the Temple; we see them sitting together, in eloquent silence it may be, yet ever and anon pausing in their writing to flash a glance of kindly inquiry across the table; Mary, in her subdued gown, with a hint of the Quakeress in every fold, and Charles eminently respectable in unimpeachable black, his massive head bent over his work, and a general look of inadequateness about the rest of the man. Let us turn to the letter in question. "You would like to see us, as we often sit writing on one table (but not on one cushion sitting) like Hermia and Helena, in the 'Mid-summer Night's Dream,' or rather like an old literary 'Darby and Joan' I taking snuff and he groaning all the while, and saying he can make nothing out of it, which he always says till he has finished and finds out he has made something of it." In contrast to