



A Treasure House

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For the scholar of nineteenth century England, the Brewer-Leigh Hunt Collection in The University of Iowa Libraries is indeed a treasure house. In that era, English intellectual and artistic circles were small and overlapping and an editor, poet, and critic as eminent as Leigh Hunt knew almost all the prominent artists, writers, and musicians of his day. At present I am working on a study of the vocalist and author Adelaide Kemble and I find so often the same people I grew to know when working on my biography of Leigh Hunt.¹ It is not surprising that the Hunt Collection should yield material from the Kemble family.

The Kembles were the royal family of the British stage. Every biographer insists upon it. Before the advent of the great Kembles in the late eighteenth century, actors and particularly actresses were disreputable. The exception was David Garrick who raised—as it was said—his profession to a liberal art and earned himself a tomb in Westminster Abbey. Sarah, John Philip, and Charles Kemble followed his example, and by reason of their intelligence, education, and social graces were received in the best drawing rooms in the land.

The Kemble family was large. The parents, Roger and Sally Kemble, were strolling players who produced twelve theatrical children, eight of whom reached adulthood, and three of whom achieved extraordinary fame. Sarah was born in 1755, and was married at eighteen to unimpressive Henry Siddons. John Philip was born in 1757 and Charles in 1775. Sarah Siddons was generally recognized as the greatest tragic actress

1. Ann Blainey, *Immortal Boy: A Portrait of Leigh Hunt* (London: Croom Helm, 1985).

ever to appear on the English stage, and professionally John Philip Kemble was not far behind her. Charles Kemble was no tragedian, but in lighter roles he was a distinguished actor and his wit and charm shone in comedy and the fashionable world alike.

Much has been written about the Kemble brothers and their sister Sarah, but virtually nothing about their spouses. The wife of Charles deserves more recognition. Mother of two famous daughters—Fanny, a celebrated actress, and Adelaide, a singer who was admired in the concert halls and opera houses of England and Europe—Mrs. Charles Kemble was remarkable for her fostering of their talent and for her personal qualities. Now, thanks to an unpublished private letter temporarily in my possession, we have a chance to see her in more detail.

Mrs. Charles Kemble was born Marie Thérèse de Camp, and was an actress from her earliest years. Her paternal grandfather was reputedly a French Duke. Years later her daughter, Adelaide Kemble, would write: "The other day in London I met in society a certain young Vicomte de Fleury who was presented to me—I could hardly help laughing as I thought how excessively distressed he would be if he did but know that the actor's little daughter whom he was honouring with his august approval was neither more nor less a cousin of his." Marie Therese's father was a down-on-his-luck French army officer who changed his name from aristocratic de Fleury to commonplace de Camp and who married—or more likely did not bother to marry—the daughter of a Swiss farmer. The eldest of their five children was the enchanting Marie Thérèse, born in Vienna in 1774 and named after the famous Austrian queen.

The consumptive de Camp took his family to England. There, ethereal little Marie Thérèse pirouetted like an angel, her talents supporting the impoverished family and making famous the troupe of child dancers with whom she performed. Writing many years later about her mother, her daughter Adelaide would say: "She was on the stage at the age of *five* years—she was a beautiful little intelligent foreign child and the favourite plaything of George the 4th when he was Prince of



Marie Thérèse De Camp Kemble drawn by E. A. Page. Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery, London.

Wales—her childhood was passed in the theatre or houses of our profligate aristocracy—at twelve years old she lost her father and by her talents and exertions *alone* supported her mother and four other children whose existence and education they owe entirely to her hard and unremitting labours—surely this is admirable?” What her daughter found even more admirable was her mother’s purity. Despite the profligacy of her surroundings, Marie Thérèse was a girl of strict virtue. Commenting on this, her daughter Adelaide wrote: “Surely it is admirable to have been placed in the two worst extremities of society, and passing through such an ordeal to have remained honourable in deed, and yet more, pure and uncontaminated in thought.”

It would perhaps have been understandable if Marie Therese had avoided the attentions of the Kemble brothers, both of whom were known for their dalliance with actresses, but her heart had been captured by the dashing Charles. For a time the courtship was off and on. Then in 1806 at the age of thirty-two she married him. Again we see the situation through Adelaide’s revealing and compassionate eyes. Her mother, she wrote, was of a “generous and confiding” nature, “a rare nature,” spoiled a little “by want of government,” and she had loved Charles Kemble “with the wildest and most passionate love since she was twenty years old.” Charles Kemble was then “a mild gently amiable person of cultivated tastes and refined habits—with a great deal of natural tenderness, but a man of the world, without one particle of romance or passion.” Having battled a life full of hazards, Marie Thérèse must have hoped that at last she had found the security she had long craved, but marriage to a man of such different temperament was doomed from the start to failure. It would be a failure, however, within the married state, and although for varying periods they lived apart, no definite separation took place. The strain of her husband’s indifference, his constant financial troubles, his fondness for alcohol, her eldest daughter Fanny’s noisily-failing marriage, and her younger son’s incipient insanity put considerable strain on her. Small wonder if her own mental

stability wavered a number of times before her death in 1838. Yet despite these trials, Marie Thérèse remained steadfast to her principles. Writing at the time of her mother's death, her daughter Adelaide would say: "Her perfect truth—the spirit not the letter of truth—always excited my utmost admiration and veneration—and her justness of perception—in all things that did not concern herself—her purity of taste, and her originality of thought and expression were wonderful and made her most attractive."

Marie Thérèse de Camp was invariably described as a "charming" actress. By the mid-1790s she was playing the lighter of the leading roles at the Haymarket and Drury Lane theatres, and by the end of that decade she had appeared in one of her own plays, *First Faults*. She would write a number of plays, mostly amusing and slight, but "charming" like herself. Before her retirement in 1819 she had become a leading actress in the Kembles' company at the Covent Garden Theatre. She emerged from retirement once for sentimental reasons ten years later—to play Lady Capulet at her elder daughter Fanny's stage debut as Juliet.

The English writer and theatrical critic Leigh Hunt admired her. In his *Autobiography* he wrote that Miss de Camp "had a beautiful figure, fine large dark eyes, and elevated features, fuller of spirit than softness, but still capable of expressing great tenderness." He added that in her finest roles, such as Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing* and Lucy Lockit in *The Beggar's Opera*, she was "admirable." She in turn revered Leigh Hunt, as revealed in an unpublished letter to him in the Leigh Hunt Collection at The University of Iowa Libraries. She was writing to him in his role as editor of the *Examiner*, probably in the year 1814, deferentially requesting publicity for her husband's theatrical success in Manchester. Their income, she explained, "must now entirely be deriv'd from his reputation, and that however highly he may be spoken of where he appears, a *circulation* of his success can alone insure its continuance." Hunt's paper was, she added "the most read, and best credited." She pleaded that "if therefore you can consistently with

your opinions insert any part of the enclos'd articles, or refer to them in any manner, you will materially serve a man who is too modest to solicit on his own behalf, and will confer a lasting obligation upon his wife." Admiring her as Hunt did, we can imagine that he was only too happy to confer that "lasting obligation."