

**Charles Lamb**

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"There are many echoes," Goethe has said, "but few voices." It is the voices that become classics in literature. The echoes have their short life and die away. Charles Lamb is one of the voices and he has lived and will continue to live.

At the age of twenty-one, already looking forward to a bright future, he gave promise of great literary achievement. But something was to happen which would change his whole life and would subject him to such a test of his manhood as he had never before undergone. There was insanity in his family. His only sister succumbed and, in a fit, killed her mother. She was at once removed to an insane asylum. On the return of her mind to normal and the consequent realization of her awful deed, she found—not the cold walls of an institution to comfort her, but a loving brother.

Lamb could not leave her there. He secured her release and made himself responsible for her safe-guarding. From that time on, until her death he took care of her in every way possible. At every recurrence of her dreadful malady which gave sure sign of its approach, brother and sister would be seen walking, hand in hand, to the gates of the institution. Because of her, he could not marry and, in after years, his "Dream Children" reveals his futile "castles in Spain."

Under such circumstances, how would you expect a man to write? Naturally you would expect his works to be a gloomy repetition of his sorrowful life. You would be wrong. For, with a super-human effort of his will, he keeps his grief and sorrow to himself. He does not burden us with the tragedy of his life.

On the contrary, his many essays are humorous beyond expectation. His "Essays of Elia" consist of a number of humorous treatises on human nature. These are the best of his works; the few he wrote are gems of literature. In his poems only do we find a something that resembles sadness. But it is not sadness. Lamb knew only too well that the saddest words written by poet or pen are, "It might have been." It might have been, in his case too, that such sorrow and grief would have



passed him by. But he does not wail over his hardship; only across the face of his essays and poetry we see him in the life he lived, and in the one he might have lived.

Thus his writings, in the main, are personal confidences. There is something that wins and touches us all in the frank disclosure of private history. What would Johnson be without Boswell, Goldsmith without Irving, Scott without Lockart? The sorrows of these widely different men draw us to them. Our delight in all they have written is heightened and sanctified by our pity for the individual man. This is the reward of the true men who live out their lives before us and therefore are a joy forever; while other men only pose, have their brief hour on the stage and then cease to be.



Alas! by some degree of woe  
We every bliss must gain;  
The heart can ne'er a transport know  
That never feels a pain.

—Lyttelton.

Dreams, books, are each a world; and books, we know,  
Are a substantial world, both pure and good;  
Round these, with tendrils strong as flesh and blood,  
Our pastime and our happiness will grow.

—Wordsworth.

