THAT LITERARY WANDERER, E. V. LUCAS

By Grant Overton

FOR a man whose air is so leisurely —whose literary air, that is, gives every aspect of leisure—Edward Verrall Lucas has written a perplexingly large number of books. Perhaps he is the living witness of the efficacy of making haste slowly. If one were a murderer, for example, one would do well to move away without haste (circumstances at all permitting) from the scene of his crime. How often is haste, or even the appearance of haste, fatal! In the unchanging words of the changing fire commissioners of the City of New York, in case of murder walk, do not run, to the nearest exit.

Mr. Lucas's murder was committed at the outset of his career and he has been traveling from it by easy stages ever since. After close on thirty years, the dark moment may be said to be below the horizon. But in his literary youth he called in and slew his first book, a volume of poems. And although the number and variety of his books since is such that he has had to put them, for the reader's guidance, under eight classifications, he has still to give us a book of his own verse.

What, then, has he given us? What not, were more quickly answered. His ten novels, being of a special character, he very fittingly designates as "Entertainments"; his thirteen volumes of "Essays" slightly outnumber his books in any other class; he has compiled eight "Anthologies" and written eight "Books for Children"; has four collections of "Selected Writings", two "Edited Works", and five works of "Biography" to his account; and is the author of seven books of "Travel", the well known "Wanderer" series. The most scholarly of his fifty seven books—total as above—is "The Life of Charles Lamb", which is definitive. The most popular must be "A Wanderer in London" and "More Wanderings in London", unless it be his first published book of all, the anthology called "The Open Road", put forth in 1899 and republished in England and America in 1923. The most amusing— ? There could be no agreement, though it is possible that later a majority might decide upon his newest novel, "Advisory Ben".

(Something is wrong with the reckoning. For the total of fifty seven and the eight classes do not contain the little treatise on "Vermeer of Delft", with its charming reproductions of paintings by Vermeer. There is, besides, no way at hand of accounting for at least fifty seven more books in which Mr. Lucas has had some hand —as, for one instance, the English edition of Christopher Morley's "Chimneysmoke", where Lucas provided the striking preface. However—)

Very evidently the work of E. V. Lucas must be examined in categories and by considering one or two examples under several of the heads; and then, perhaps, the glimpse of his personality afforded us may be lit from within as well as without. It will perhaps clear the ground if we point out in preliminary that Mr. Lucas is one of the editors of "Punch" and has for

long been a reader and literary adviser and director for the London firm of Methuen and Company, Ltd.—a house of great distinction. He has done much journalistic work. As would be inferred from "Vermeer of Delft", he is something of a connoisseur of painting, and as will be shown, he is much more distinctly a connoisseur of literary curiosities.

In providing his "entertainments", as he terms his novels, Mr. Lucas has had in mind a structure always consistent, always graceful, generally amusing but of very real strength. His fictions may be compared to trellises set up with care to support as a rule no more serious burden than rambler roses or some other innocent vine. But it has occasionally happened that the trellis has been climbed upon by a plant of more rugged growth and heavier weight, and the trellis has never failed to sustain the spreading story. It might be apter to say that the plant has sometimes put forth an unexpected flower—instead of the unpretending rambler blossom a rose more disdainful—and still the frame has seemed eminently in keeping with the whole design.

Characteristic is the device employed by Mr. Lucas in his most recent book of this sort, "Advisory Ben". Benita Stavely is an attractive girl who struggles with cooks and other domestic matters until her father remarries, when she finds herself free to select an occupation. She starts an advisory bureau to assist harassed householders. The Beck and Call, as her office is styled, soon justifies Ben's venture by its popularity. It is approached through a bookshop below and to it come all manner of persons for counsel as to dogs, cooks, birthday presents, and matrimony. The bookshop is kept by two young men. Ben's crowning performance before she says "Yes" to one of the young men in the bookshop is the finding and furnishing in three weeks of a large house for a rich American. Now there are present in this engaging novel the two requisites of Mr. Lucas's art as a fictioner: first, the amiable pretext or excuse for the tale, the slight but bright invention, which is of course the notion of the Beck and Call itself; and second, the strength, erectile, tensile, and otherwise in the elaborated structure. For although the scheme of the story is slender and the design of a gay simplicity, the situations developed by Ben's venture sometimes enable the author to touch considerable depths of human feeling. But the airy scheme, the graceful trellis, does not break. I do not mean that no strength is due to the character portrayal; much is due to it. Obviously, if Ben were a flitterbrain, if Mr. Lucas could give her no depth of feeling or not enough personal sincerity, his story would crash. But Ben without the Beck and Call would be Ben without opportunities to enable us to realize her quality. An idea is at the bottom of all.

The same virtue of idea or scheme is the technical triumph of "The Vermilion Box", in which Mr. Lucas uses the familiar red letter box of England as his device. He says, secretly, "Open Sesame", and the mail box opens to give us a series of letters between friends, acquaintances, lovers, relatives who are all entangled in the web of the world war.

"Verena in the Midst" also employs effectively the device of interchanged letters to develop the tale, and surely not even the expedient of the Beck and Call is better conceived than the tale of the adventures of

Uncle Cavanagh in giving away his wife's property ("Genevra's Money"). There are bits about the Barbizon school of painting and there is a surprising deal about religious concepts in "Genevra's Money", but I have yet to hear it said that this informative and speculative matter obtrudes itself or overweights the book. It dwells comfortably alongside the high comedy of Uncle Giles (whose sole intellectual accomplishment is the verdict, general and specific, upon persons he doesn't understand: "He's a nasty feller") because Mr. Lucas had the courage, not of his convictions but of his ingenuity, in the first place.

That he has convictions can scarcely be doubted by the careful reader; the nature of them can scarcely be missed by the thoughtful one. They may now and then be stated more plainly in his books of essays, for the nature of the essay exacts that, but they cannot be put with more poignancy.

It would not be difficult—it would in fact, be ignobly easy — to point to this essay of Mr. Lucas's as indicative of the power of pathos, that one as showing the exercise of comedy, another as the evidence of a controlled irony which are his. So one might make a swift and triumphant recapitulation of the gifts and qualities of a literary personality among the most rounded of its time. But I had rather not be facile, for the sake, if possible, of going more surely. "Most of the other essays are exceedingly light in texture", observes Arnold Bennett, in a comment on "One Day and Another" "They leave no loophole for criticism, for their accomplishment is always at least as high as their ambition. They are serenely well done." But—"it could not have been without intention that he put first in this new book an essay describing the manufacture of a professional criminal."*

Nor, I think, was it without intention that "Giving and Receiving" closes with that quietly expressed but piercing account of a bullfight, "Whenever I See a Grey Horse . . ." The word "whimsical" has come to have a connotation exclusively buoyant or cheerful, although the habit of fancy —it is far more habit than gift—may be indulged in any direction congenial to one's nature. Mr. Lucas is whimsical enough in the series of tiny fables ("Once Upon a Time") composing the last section of "Cloud and Silver". But one of his "whimsies" is savage in its scorn of the hunters of pheasants, another calmly reckons the totals of five years' expenditure on cloakroom fees for a hat and stick, and a third of the twenty, called "Progress", is so brief it is better quoted than characterized:

> Once upon a time there was a little boy who asked his father if Nero was a bad man.
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> "Thoroughly bad", said his father.
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> Once upon a time, many years later, there was another little boy who asked his father if Nero was a bad man.
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> "I don't know that one should exactly say that", replied his father: "we ought not to be quite so sweeping. But he certainly had his less felicitous moments."

This, like much of Mr. Lucas's expression in the essay, is far too perfect to be spoiled by an embroidery of analytical adjectives. Llewellyn Jones very properly cites the opening paragraph of the essay, "Of Plans for One More Spring" ("Cloud and Silver"), as a fine illustration of "what an emotional effect Mr. Lucas can achieve from the simplest materials".†

Books and Persons, page 153.

†See pamphlet, *E. V. Lucas: Novelist, Essayist, Friendly Wanderer*. DORAN.

The essay was written in February, 1915.

> It is much on my mind just now that I must not waste a minute of the spring that is coming. We have waited for it longer than for any before, and the world has grown so strange and unlovely since spring was here last. Life has become so cheap, human nature has become so cruel and wanton, that all sense of security has gone. Hence this spring must be lived, every moment of it.

It will be found that in his moments of most entire abandonment to comedy Mr. Lucas is clearly engrossed in the problem of human nature. "The Battle of the Mothers", in "Giving and Receiving", is laughable throughout; but the recollection is deepened by the very gentleness of the satire. An Archdeacon enters a club and explains to friends that he has been on a motor tour with his mother, who is ninety one and "in the pink of condition" and delights in motoring.

> "Well", said the testy man, "you needn't be so conceited about it. You are not the only person with an elderly mother. I have a mother too."
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> We switched round to this new centre of surprise. It was even more incredible that this man should have a mother than the Archdeacon. No one had ever suspected him of anything so extreme, for he had a long white beard and hobbled with a stick.

The highly diverting dialogue ensuing would be forgotten as quickly as read were it not the quintessence of that amiable self conceit common to us all. A similar effect is the secret of "The Snowball", in "Luck of the Year", where a man ponders what to do with a good luck chain letter—poohpoohs it, figures its rapid and enormous multiplication in a week, ponders the letter's promise of good fortune, begins to jot down the names of nine friends, reaches toward the wastebasket, draws back his hand—. Occasionally, indeed, these essays of Mr. Lucas's compose themselves perfectly as short stories; if, as I suppose, the work of Katherine Mansfield and others has taught us that a short story need not be the jack-in-box of plot. Such, in "Luck of the Year", is "The Human Touch", which deals with a single horse cab driver among the battalions of taxicabs. "When the express arrived he galvanized his horse and began to make alluring signs and sounds as the passengers emerged; but one and all repulsed him." Equally a short story, and a very good one, is "A Study in Symmetry", in "Adventures and Enthusiasms", where the conceit of a painter of portraits is gently punctured.

"Unless my judgment is much at fault, there has written in English, since the death of R. L. Stevenson, no one so proficient in the pure art of the essayist as Mr. E. V. Lucas", says Edmund Gosse at the beginning of "The Essays of Mr. Lucas", in his volume "Books on the Table". This essay on an essayist should be consulted either in Mr. Gosse's own volume or in F. H. Pritchard's "Essays of To-day: An Anthology". No more authoritative or more charmingly stated estimate of Mr. Lucas as an essayist is known to me.

Taste. It is an underlying quality with Lucas, after all. I do not say "catholicity of taste", for it seems to me redundant. A taste which should allow itself to be fenced in would soon shrivel and die for lack of exercise; for what is taste but the faculty of selection constantly exerted and how can one have it except by its unremitting use?

His taste, then, distinguishes Mr. Lucas as a connoisseur of literary curiosities, which, when taste is shown, become also human concerns. "The

Innocent's Progress", in "Adventures and Enthusiasms", a description of an obsolete book of manners for the young, is a lesser example of Mr. Lucas's taste; his candid rejection of English slang because it is undescriptive, and acceptance of American slang because it applies and illustrates, is the application of excellent taste to a strictly contemporary point*—and no test of taste is more exacting. The essays on "Breguet", the great French watchmaker, in "Giving and Receiving", and on Hans Christian Andersen and John Leech ("Adventures and Enthusiasms") are to many readers of more importance than a modern topic like "Telephonics" ("Adventures and Enthusiasms"). For while taste must choose, and help us to choose, among the things of the hour, its service in the rescue of the past is an education in taste as well as an enrichment of the present.

Mr. Lucas (to illustrate) never practised his literary connoisseurship to a more humane and generous end than when he gave us, in 1916, "The Hausfrau Rampant". This, like his edition of Charles and Mary Lamb, is an edited work. Julius Stinde (1841-1905), a native of Holstein, Germany, was originally a chemist and the author of an elaborate treatise on "Wasser und Seife" (Water and Soap), to which he affixed the name of his charwoman, Frau Wilhelmine Buchholz, as author. Later it occurred to Stinde to write a satire on the typical middle class Berlin family with marriageable daughters; he elevated Frau Wilhelmine to the ranks of the bourgeoisie and began a book, or rather a series of books, which became as popular in Germany as Dickens in England. England, France, and America all uttered praise of "The Buchholz Family" in the 1880's, and with good reason. The work, outside of Germany, had been lost sight of for nearly thirty years when Lucas, rendered sleepless by a struggle with mosquitoes one night in Venice, came upon the first volume of the English translation in his landlord's library. The quality was such as to make him hunt up the other three English volumes; and from the work as a whole he selected the most entertaining passages, "joining them together with some explanatory cement". This is "The Hausfrau Rampant". It was, of course, with a purpose that Mr. Lucas published "The Hausfrau Rampant" at a time when feeling in England and America ran high against the country of Stinde. The purpose will be obvious to anyone reading Lucas's introduction to the book. No imaginable eloquence could be so effective as the word portrait of Herr Stinde there presented. The possession of taste carries its own courage with it.

One could go on, as it were, indefinitely, but with Mr. Lucas as guide never indefinably. Such an anthology as "The Open Road" knows what many an anthology never knows—readers who return to it again and again because it is inclusive without being indiscriminate. The impressions of India, Japan, and America in "Roving East and Roving West" are among the most valuable any traveler has put down because they are single impressions and because, with Mr. Lucas, to see is to choose, as with a painter. It is when he comes to consider work where a fine talent has already seen and chosen, as in his "Vermeer of Delft", that he becomes singularly luminous; with the ground cleared, he can give his enthusiasm rein. His "Wanderer" books on London, Paris,

*"Of Slang—English and American", in *Cloud and Silver.*

Venice, Florence, and Holland are digressive in the sense that the longest way round is the shortest way home—in other words, the associations of a scene are the shortest cut to enabling us really to see it.

But a few words must be said about E. V. Lucas, the man.

"A youngish fifty, perhaps", wrote Robert Cortes Holliday*, meeting him in 1919 or 1920 in Chicago. "Rather tall. A good weight, not over heavy. Light on his feet, like a man who has taken his share in active field games. Something of a stoop. A smile, good, natural, but sly. Dark hair, shot with gray. Noble prow of a nose. Most striking note of all, that ruddy complexion, ruddy to a degree which (as I reflect upon the matter) seems to be peculiar to a certain type of Englishman." Mr. Lucas spent several days in Chicago on this visit, but only about four persons knew it at the time. Mr. Holliday noted that Lucas studied his menu card "with deep attention" and was particular about the service of the dinner when it came. He was not on a lecture tour and inquired about recent literary visitors from England, appearing to be "much amused at the number of them". He punned twice, badly, spoke admiringly of American humor and especially of the work of Don Marquis†, and remarked on the number of American words "which mean so much, and mean nothing at all, like 'cave-man' and 'mother love' ". It also appeared that Lucas could do no writing in a hotel room.

Like nearly all authors, he has an inexhaustible store of gossip about other authors.

"He has a kind of mischievous cruelty in his dissection of humanity", a distinguished novelist once remarked, speaking of Lucas's conversation. "But he is extremely good company", came in the next breath. This observer added: "I always think that the best picture of Lucas's character is to be found in Bennett's 'Books and Persons'." Here it is:

> Mr. Lucas is a highly mysterious man. On the surface he might be mistaken for a mere cricket enthusiast. Dig down, and you will come, with not too much difficulty, to the simple man of letters. Dig further, and, with somewhat more difficulty, you will come to an agreeably ironic critic of human foibles. Try to dig still further, and you will probably encounter rock. Only here and there in his two novels does Mr. Lucas allow us to glimpse a certain powerful and sardonic harshness in him, indicative of a mind that has seen the world and irrevocably judged it in most of its manifestations. I could believe that Mr. Lucas is an ardent politician, who, however, would not deign to mention his passionately held views save with a pencil on a ballotpaper—if then! . . . Immanent in the book ["One Day and Another"] is the calm assurance of a man perfectly aware that it will be a passing hard task to get change out of *him!*

And here is more testimony, to the same general effect:

> E. V. Lucas always reminds me of Kipling's "cat that walked by itself". He knows everybody, but I have often wondered whether anybody really knows him. He is an amazingly busy man—the assistant editor of "Punch", the literary director of Methuen's, the writer of almost countless charming and distinguished essays, to say nothing of novels and travel books. As a writer he has the appealing urbanity of Charles Lamb, of whom he has written far and away the best biography in the language. But I do not think that there is much of Lamb's urbanity in E. V. Lucas the man, the gentle-voiced, modern, rather weary man of the world. The humor of the Lucas essays is sunny and kindly. The humor of Lucas himself is cynically tolerant.
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> I have said that Lucas knows everybody. The only circles into which he never goes are literary circles. Where professional writers are gathered together, there you will never find E. V. Lucas. He prefers actors and prizefighters. There is a story that

Men and Books and Cities, pages 196-203, 206.

†See "Stories and Humorists" and "Chicago" in *Roving East and Roving West.*

Lucas once gave a dinner party at the Athenæum Club to which he invited Carpentier and Harry Tate. I do not altogether disbelieve that story, but a bishop ought to have been included in the party to make it complete.

Lucas loves cricket, and is a good man to dine with. His talk is stimulating and his taste in wine perfection.*

Possibly E. V. Lucas's closest personal friends among writers in America—certainly his closest temperamental affinities—are Don Marquis and Christopher Morley. Occupationally, as the sociologist would say, he is allied with such fellow editors as E. T. Raymond and A. A. Milne and with such publishers' literary advisers as—not to go back to George Meredith, who read for Chapman and Hall—Frank Swinnerton, who reads for Chatto and Windus, and J. D. Beresford, reader for Collins.

*A writer in *John o' London's Weekly*, London—possibly Sidney Dark. Reprinted in the Boston *Evening Transcript* of March 3, 1923.

Bibliography

ANTHOLOGIES

1899 *The Open Road*
—— *The Friendly Town*
—— *Her Infinite Variety*
—— *Good Company*
—— *The Gentlest Art*
—— *The Second Post*
—— *The Best of Lamb*
—— *Remember Louvain*

BIOGRAPHY

—— *A Swan and Her Friends*
—— *The British School*
—— *The Hambledon Men*
—— *The Life of Charles Lamb*
1921 *The Life and Work of E. A. Abbey, R.A.*
1922 *Vermeer of Delft*

BOOKS FOR CHILDREN

1908 *Anne's Terrible Good-Nature*
1910 *The Slowcoach*
—— *A Book of Verses for Children*
—— *Another Book of Verses for Children*
—— *Runaways and Castaways*
—— *Forgotten Stories of Long Ago*
—— *More Forgotten Stories*
—— *The "Original Verses" of Ann and Jane Taylor*

EDITED WORKS

—— *The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*
1916 *The Hausfrau Rampant*

SELECTED WRITINGS

—— *A Little of Everything*
—— *Harvest Home*
—— *Variety Lane*
—— *Mixed Vintages*

ENTERTAINMENTS

1906 *Listener's Lure*
1908 *Over Bemerton's*
1910 *Mr. Ingleside*
1912 *London Lavender*
1914 *Landmarks*
1916 *The Vermilion Box*
1920 *Verena in the Midst*
1921 *Rose and Rose*
1922 *Genevra's Money*
1924 *Advisory Ben*

ESSAYS

1907 *Character and Comedy*
1909 *One Day and Another*
1911 *Old Lamps For New*
1913 *Loiterer's Harvest*
—— *Fireside and Sunshine*
1916 *Cloud and Silver*
1917 *A Boswell of Baghdad*
1918 *Twixt Eagle and Dove*
1919 *The Phantom Journal*
1920 *Adventures and Enthusiasms*
1921 *Roving East and Roving West*
1922 *Giving and Receiving*
1923 *Luck of the Year*

TRAVEL

1904 *Highways and Byways in Sussex*
1905 *A Wanderer in Holland*
1906 *A Wanderer in London*
1909 *A Wanderer in Paris*
1912 *A Wanderer in Florence*
1914 *A Wanderer in Venice*
1916 *More Wanderings in London* (in England, *London Revisited*)

WRITTEN WITH C. L. GRAVES

1903 *Wisdom While You Wait*