

A TALK WITH EDWARD VERRALL LUCAS¹

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"HOW many different editions of Mark Twain's works have appeared in England?" asked E. V. Lucas, the great essayist, when I visited his publication office in Little Essex Street several years ago.

Seeing that I was at a loss to answer this question, he rang a bell and whispered something to a page. In a minute the boy returned with a pile of books, and after barely glancing them over, Lucas described all the different editions of Mark Twain. Without doubt it is only such a rapid method of work as this that has enabled him, although continually busy as the head of a large publishing house, to write over fifty books.

For a vivid personal description of the man, I cannot do better than quote William Cortes Holliday who met him about fifteen years ago: "A youngish man; fifty, perhaps, 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, but shot with grey. 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."

Lucas was born in 1868, and was about twenty years old when he broke into print: some satirical verses in the *Globe* newspaper. Three or four years after, on leaving University College, London, he joined the staff of the same paper. His first book, *A Life of Charles Lamb's Friend*, Barnard Barton, appeared in 1893; his first anthology, *The Open Road*, in 1899. In 1904 was published the first of his travel books, *Highways and Byways in Sussex*. The year following appeared the delightful *Wanderer in London*, which was to inaugurate a whole series of *Wanderer* books dealing with the principal cities of Europe. Last year, in every bookstore in Paris, I saw copies of *A Wanderer in Paris*. All Americans and Englishmen who

1. Mr. Lucas died on June 27th, 1938.

2. This paper was read, corrected, and approved, by Mr. Lucas himself. Mr. Lucas scratched out this adjective, but the reader will agree with me that it should be retained.

visit the French capital make this book their *vade mecum*. It is a guide book that people appreciate, not only as a means to an end, but as a joy in itself. I had the same experience in Florence, Rome, and the other cities that the Wanderer has written about. No matter how many have covered the same city before, Lucas always finds something new and original to say.

In his spare time during the course of a few years Lucas produced his *Life of Charles Lamb*, which has become the standard biography of the Gentle Elia, leaving little or nothing for future biographers to do. But however excellent are his biographies, his novels (of which he has given us over a dozen), and his travel-books, it is undoubtedly as an essayist that Lucas will go down to posterity. Of his essays, St. John Adcock has written so admirably, ". . . . Whether they take a theme that drifts into thought that is deep enough for tears, or is lively with burlesque laughter, or lighter in idea than thistledown or almost as intangible as the air, they are as delicately done as any filigree carving in ivory, and have a genial, friendly companionable warmth of humanity in them that makes the comparison with ivory inadequate. His admirers used to be amused that Swift could sit down and write an essay on a broomstick; but Lucas does not require a broomstick, he can write a delightfully quaint, witty, or wise essay on nothing at all."

When I told Lucas how illuminating his *Wanderer* books had been to me: he replied:

"Before commencing to write each one, I always endeavoured to catch the particular spirit of the city, and to determine the characteristics that distinguished that city from all others, both ancient and modern. And once having arrived at the personality of a city in my own mind, I spared myself nothing to make my readers see the city in the same manner that I did. Whether I leave out a church or a museum that all the guide books consider a grievous offence for the tourist to miss, I care not at all."

When we began a discussion of the great novels being made into motion pictures, Lucas said:

"If I knew that a play was going to be made from one of my favorite books, I would not go to the theatre, but would spend the evening in some other way. But a few nights ago I happened to see *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn* on the films, and I am bound to say that the film story has been prepared with the utmost skill and reverence. This may be because the producer has been dealing with an American classic

of a very special kind, primarily for American audiences who know it well enough to check him off. But whatever the reason, the film is one of the best arranged and best acted that I have ever seen."

Then I asked Lucas what he thought of Mark Twain,

"Many years ago," he replied, "I wrote that *Leaves of Grass* and *Huckleberry Finn* were the two finest American books: meaning not merely books written by Americans. Although many American books have since been written, I am to-day of the same opinion."

After offering me a cigarette, and lighting one for himself, Lucas continued:

"When I had the honor of meeting Mark Twain at a *Punch* dinner (Mr. Lucas has been one of the leading contributors to this celebrated magazine for many years) on his last visit to England, I asked him why he had never incorporated in *Huckleberry Finn* the glorious chapters about the boasting bargemen which he dropped into *Life on the Mississippi*. His reasons were not too understandable, but I gather that some copyright question was involved. There is nothing in *Huckleberry Finn* quite the same as the episode, nor indeed anywhere else, except perhaps in the *Book of Job*."

American authors were discussed for a while. After telling me that he knew and liked Christopher Morley, Oliver Herford, William Cortes Holliday, and Hamlin Garland, Lucas went on to say:

"I have just been reading an interesting article in an American magazine, one of a series called *Travels of a Literary Nomad*, by Hamlin Garland. The article this month tells about his meeting with Conan Doyle and Bernard Shaw."

Lucas was the only man of letters I met during my whole stay in England who mentioned an American magazine, and who seemed to have an active interest in American literature, thus giving yet another indication of his broad interests. As the conversation proceeded, I tried to urge Lucas to say something about his own life, but without success, for he possesses the modesty characteristic of all people who are both charming and great. There are only three facts given about him in *Who's Who*: that he is chairman of the publishing firm of Methuen and Company, that he has been a member since 1928 of the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, and that he is the recipient of the Honorary Doctor of Laws from Saint Andrews University. The remainder of the entry is taken up

with the names of his books. How refreshing to find a man who lets his work speak for himself. His books are this happy man's jewels, even as Cornelia's children were hers.

I asked the greatest living authority on Charles Lamb if the latter had ever met Thomas Love Peacock or Mrs. Inchbald.

"That Lamb met Thomas Love Peacock," replied Lucas, with the authority of one who had devoted many years of his life to a particular study, "is gathered from the story that at a banquet he once drew attention to an egg in the salad as being 'what a drunken Peacock might lay'. I have seen no word as to his knowledge or appreciation of Peacock's work. Mrs. Inchbald he looked on rather as a joke."

The question came up of where is the best place for authors to write. To the remark that I had lately been talking to an author who did most of his writing in hotel rooms, Lucas replied:

"It is a queer thing, but I have never been able to write a word in hotel rooms. What inspiration I ordinarily have totally leaves me. But, strange to say, I have no difficulty at all in writing both in trains and in aeroplanes."

Just before leaving I presented Lucas with a certificate which stated that he was a member "in good standing" of an American Society. Whereupon he sent this greeting to his fellow members:

"My best wishes go to any Society that describes me as being in good standing."