E. F. BENSON

SATIRE AND SUPERNATURAL

ESSENTIAL NOVELISTS

TACET BOOKS

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E. F. Benson

EDITED BY

August Nemo

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Author

ENGLISH NOVELIST, BIOGRAPHER, memoirist, archaeologist and short story writer, best known now for the Mapp and Lucia series, written relatively late in his career.

Benson's first novel was Dodo (1893), which was an instant success, and followed it with a variety of satire and romantic and supernatural melodrama. He repeated the success of Dodo with the same cast of characters a generation later: Dodo the Second (1914), "a unique chronicle of the pre-1914 Bright Young Things" and Dodo Wonders (1921), "a first-hand social history of the Great War in Mayfair and the Shires".

Benson was also known as a writer of atmospheric, oblique, and at times humorous or satirical ghost stories, which were often first published in story magazines such as Pearson's Magazine or Hutchinson's Magazine, 20 of which were illustrated by Edmund Blampied. These "spook stories", as they were also called, were then reprinted in collections by his principal publisher, Walter Hutchinson. His 1906 short story, "The Bus-Conductor", a fatal-crash premonition tale about a person haunted by a hearse driver, has been adapted several times, notably in 1944 (in the film Dead of Night and as an anecdote in Bennett Cerf's Ghost Stories anthology published the same year) and in a 1961 episode of The Twilight Zone. The catchphrase from the story, "Room for one more", even spawned an urban legend, and also appears in the 1986 Oingo Boingo song, "Dead Man's Party".

H. P. Lovecraft spoke highly of Benson's works in his “Supernatural Horror in Literature”, most notably of his story "The Man Who Went Too Far".

Benson's David Blaize and the Blue Door (1918) is a children's fantasy influenced by the work of Lewis Carroll. "Mr Tilly's Seance" is a witty and amusing story about a man flattened by a traction-engine who finds himself dead and conscious on the 'other side'. Other notable stories are the eerie "The Room in the Tower" and "Pirates".

Benson is also known for a series of biographies/autobiographies and memoirs, including one of Charlotte Brontë. His last book, delivered to his publisher ten days before his death, was an autobiography entitled Final Edition.

Queen Lucia

Chapter one

THOUGH THE SUN WAS hot on this July morning Mrs Lucas preferred to cover the half-mile that lay between the station and her house on her own brisk feet, and sent on her maid and her luggage in the fly that her husband had ordered to meet her. After those four hours in the train a short walk would be pleasant, but, though she veiled it from her conscious mind, another motive, sub-consciously engineered, prompted her action. It would, of course, be universally known to all her friends in Riseholme that she was arriving today by the 12.26, and at that hour the village street would be sure to be full of them. They would see the fly with luggage draw up at the door of The Hurst, and nobody except her maid would get out.

That would be an interesting thing for them: it would cause one of those little thrills of pleasant excitement and conjectural exercise which supplied Riseholme with its emotional daily bread. They would all wonder what had happened to her, whether she had been taken ill at the very last moment before leaving town and with her well-known fortitude and consideration for the feelings of others, had sent her maid on to assure her husband that he need not be anxious. That would clearly be Mrs Quantock’s suggestion, for Mrs Quantock’s mind, devoted as it was now to the study of Christian Science, and the determination to deny the existence of pain, disease and death as regards herself, was always full of the gloomiest views as regards her friends, and on the slightest excuse, pictured that they, poor blind things, were suffering from false claims. Indeed, given that the fly had already arrived at The Hurst, and that its arrival had at this moment been seen by or reported to Daisy

Quantock, the chances were vastly in favour of that lady's having already started in to give Mrs Lucas absent treatment. Very likely Georgie Pillson had also seen the anticlimax of the fly's arrival, but he would hazard a much more probable though erroneous solution of her absence. He would certainly guess that she had sent on her maid with her luggage to the station in order to take a seat for her, while she herself, oblivious of the passage of time, was spending her last half hour in contemplation of the Italian masterpieces at the National Gallery, or the Greek bronzes at the British Museum. Certainly she would not be at the Royal Academy, for the culture of Riseholme, led by herself, rejected as valueless all artistic efforts later than the death of Sir Joshua Reynolds, and a great deal of what went before. Her husband with his firm grasp of the obvious, on the other hand, would be disappointingly capable even before her maid confirmed his conjecture, of concluding that she had merely walked from the station.

The motive, then, that made her send her cab on, though subconsciously generated, soon penetrated into her consciousness, and these guesses at what other people would think when they saw it arrive without her, sprang from the dramatic element that formed so large a part of her mentality, and made her always take, as by right divine, the leading part in the histrionic entertainments with which the cultured of Riseholme beguiled or rather strenuously occupied such moments as could be spared from their studies of art and literature, and their social engagements. Indeed she did not usually stop at taking the leading part, but, if possible, doubled another character with it, as well as being stage-manager and adapter, if not designer of scenery. Whatever she did — and really she did an incredible deal — she did it with all the might of her dramatic perception, did it in fact with such earnestness that she had no time to have an eye to the gallery at all, she

simply contemplated herself and her own vigorous accomplishment. When she played the piano as she frequently did, (reserving an hour for practice every day), she cared not in the smallest degree for what anybody who passed down the road outside her house might be thinking of the roulades that poured from her open window: she was simply Emmeline Lucas, absorbed in glorious Bach or dainty Scarletti, or noble Beethoven. The latter perhaps was her favorite composer, and many were the evenings when with lights quenched and only the soft effulgence of the moon pouring in through the uncurtained windows, she sat with her profile, cameo-like (or like perhaps to the head on a postage stamp) against the dark oak walls of her music-room, and entranced herself and her listeners, if there were people to dinner, with the exquisite pathos of the first movement of the Moonlight Sonata. Devotedly as she worshipped the Master, whose picture hung above her Steinway Grand, she could never bring herself to believe that the two succeeding movements were on the same sublime level as the first, and besides they “went” very much faster. But she had seriously thought, as she came down in the train today and planned her fresh activities at home of trying to master them, so that she could get through their intricacies with tolerable accuracy. Until then, she would assuredly stop at the end of the first movement in these moonlit seances, and say that the other two were more like morning and afternoon. Then with a sigh she would softly shut the piano lid, and perhaps wiping a little genuine moisture from her eyes, would turn on the electric light and taking up a book from the table, in which a paper-knife marked the extent of her penetration, say:

“Georgie, you must really promise me to read this life of Antonino Caporelli the moment I have finished it. I never understood the rise of the Venetian School before. As I read

I can smell the salt tide creeping up over the lagoon, and see the campanile of dear Torcello.”

And Georgie would put down the tambour on which he was working his copy of an Italian cope and sigh too.

“You are too wonderful!” he would say. “How do you find time for everything?”

She rejoined with the apophthegm that made the rounds of Riseholme next day.

“My dear, it is just busy people that have time for everything.”

It might be thought that even such activities as have here been indicated would be enough to occupy anyone so busily that he would positively not have time for more, but such was far from being the case with Mrs Lucas. Just as the painter Rubens amused himself with being the ambassador to the Court of St. James — a sufficient career in itself for most busy men — so Mrs Lucas amused herself, in the intervals of her pursuit of Art for Art’s sake, with being not only an ambassador but a monarch. Riseholme might perhaps according to the crude materialism of maps, be included in the kingdom of Great Britain, but in a more real and inward sense it formed a complete kingdom of its own, and its queen was undoubtedly Mrs Lucas, who ruled it with a secure autocracy pleasant to contemplate at a time when thrones were toppling, and imperial crowns whirling like dead leaves down the autumn winds. The ruler of Riseholme, happier than he of Russia, had no need to fear the finger of Bolshevism writing on the wall, for there was not in the whole of that vat which seethed so pleasantly with culture, one bubble of revolutionary ferment. Here there was neither poverty nor discontent nor muttered menace of any upheaval: Mrs Lucas, busy and serene,

worked harder than any of her subjects, and exercised an autocratic control over a nominal democracy.

Something of the consciousness of her sovereignty was in her mind, as she turned the last hot corner of the road and came in sight of the village street that constituted her kingdom. Indeed it belonged to her, as treasure trove belongs to the Crown, for it was she who had been the first to begin the transformation of this remote Elizabethan village into the palace of culture that was now reared on the spot where ten years ago an agricultural population had led bovine and unilluminated lives in their cottages of grey stone or brick and timber. Before that, while her husband was amassing a fortune, comfortable in amount and respectable in origin, at the Bar, she had merely held up a small dim lamp of culture in Onslow Gardens. But both her ambition and his had been to bask and be busy in artistic realms of their own when the materialistic needs were provided for by sound investments, and so when there were the requisite thousands of pounds in secure securities she had easily persuaded him to buy three of these cottages that stood together in a low two-storied block. Then, by judicious removal of partition-walls, she had, with the aid of a sympathetic architect, transmuted them into a most comfortable dwelling, subsequently building on to them a new wing, that ran at right angles at the back, which was, if anything, a shade more inexorably Elizabethan than the stem onto which it was grafted, for here was situated the famous smoking-parlour, with rushes on the floor, and a dresser ranged with pewter tankards, and leaded lattice-windows of glass so antique that it was practically impossible to see out of them. It had a huge open fireplace framed in oak-beams with a seat on each side of the iron-backed hearth within the chimney, and a genuine spit hung over the middle of the fire. Here, though in the rest of the house she had for the sake of convenience allowed the

installation of electric light, there was no such concession made, and sconces on the walls held dim iron lamps, so that only those of the most acute vision were able to read. Even then reading was difficult, for the book-stand on the table contained nothing but a few crabbed black-letter volumes dating from not later than the early seventeenth century, and you had to be in a frantically Elizabethan frame of mind to be at ease there. But Mrs Lucas often spent some of her rare leisure moments in the smoking-parlour, playing on the virginal that stood in the window, or kippering herself in the fumes of the wood-fire as with streaming eyes she deciphered an Elzevir Horace rather late for inclusion under the rule, but an undoubted bargain.

The house stood at the end of the village that was nearest the station, and thus, when the panorama of her kingdom opened before her, she had but a few steps further to go. A yew-hedge, bought entire from a neighboring farm, and transplanted with solid lumps of earth and indignant snails around its roots, separated the small oblong of garden from the road, and cast monstrous shadows of the shapes into which it was cut, across the little lawns inside. Here, as was only right and proper, there was not a flower to be found save such as were mentioned in the plays of Shakespeare; indeed it was called Shakespeare’s garden, and the bed that ran below the windows of the dining room was Ophelia’s border, for it consisted solely of those flowers which that distraught maiden distributed to her friends when she should have been in a lunatic asylum. Mrs Lucas often reflected how lucky it was that such institutions were unknown in Elizabeth’s day, or that, if known, Shakespeare artistically ignored their existence. Pansies, naturally, formed the chief decoration — though there were some very flourishing plants of rue. Mrs Lucas always wore a little bunch of them when in flower, to inspire her thoughts, and found them wonderfully efficacious. Round the sundial,

which was set in the middle of one of the squares of grass between which a path of broken paving-stone led to the front door, was a circular border, now, in July, sadly vacant, for it harboured only the spring-flowers enumerated by Perdita. But the first day every year when Perdita's border put forth its earliest blossom was a delicious anniversary, and the news of it spread like wild-fire through Mrs Lucas's kingdom, and her subjects were very joyful, and came to salute the violet or daffodil, or whatever it was.

The three cottages dexterously transformed into The Hurst, presented a charmingly irregular and picturesque front. Two were of the grey stone of the district and the middle one, to the door of which led the paved path, of brick and timber; latticed windows with stone mullions gave little light to the room within, and certain new windows had been added; these could be detected by the observant eye for they had a markedly older appearance than the rest. The front-door, similarly, seemed as if it must have been made years before the house, the fact being that the one which Mrs Lucas had found there was too dilapidated to be of the slightest service in keeping out wind or wet or undesired callers. She had therefore caused to be constructed an even older one made from the oak-planks of a dismantled barn, and had it studded with large iron nails of antique pattern made by the village blacksmith. He had arranged some of them to look as if they spelled A.D. 1603. Over the door hung an inn-sign, and into the space where once the sign had swung was now inserted a lantern, in which was ensconced, well hidden from view by its patinated glass sides, an electric light. This was one of the necessary concessions to modern convenience, for no lamp nurtured on oil would pierce those genuinely opaque panes, and illuminate the path to the gate. Better to have an electric light than cause your guests to plunge into Perdita's border. By the side of this fortress-door hung a heavy iron bell-pull, ending in a mermaid. When

first Mrs Lucas had that installed, it was a bell-pull in the sense that an extremely athletic man could, if he used both hands and planted his feet firmly, cause it to move, so that a huge bronze bell swung in the servants' passage and eventually gave tongue (if the athlete continued pulling) with vibrations so sonorous that the white-wash from the ceiling fell down in flakes. She had therefore made another concession to the frailty of the present generation and the inconveniences of having whitewash falling into salads and puddings on their way to the dining room, and now at the back of the mermaid's tail was a potent little bone button, coloured black and practically invisible, and thus the bell-pull had been converted into an electric bell-push. In this way visitors could make their advent known without violent exertion, the mermaid lost no visible whit of her Elizabethan virginity, and the spirit of Shakespeare wandering in his garden would not notice any anachronism. He could not in fact, for there was none to notice.

Though Mrs Lucas's parents had bestowed the name of Emmeline on her, it was not to be wondered at that she was always known among the more intimate of her subjects as Lucia, pronounced, of course, in the Italian mode — La Lucia, the wife of Lucas; and it was as "Lucia mia" that her husband hailed her as he met her at the door of The Hurst.

He had been watching for her arrival from the panes of the parlour while he meditated upon one of the little prose poems which formed so delectable a contribution to the culture of Riseholme, for though, as had been hinted, he had in practical life a firm grasp of the obvious, there were windows in his soul which looked out onto vague and ethereal prospects which so far from being obvious were only dimly intelligible. In form these odes were cast in the loose rhythms of Walt Whitman, but their smooth suavity and their contents bore no resemblance whatever to the

productions of that barbaric bard, whose works were quite unknown in Riseholme. Already a couple of volumes of these prose-poems had been published, not of course in the hard business-like establishment of London, but at “Ye Sign of ye Daffodil,” on the village green, where type was set up by hand, and very little, but that of the best, was printed. The press had only been recently started at Mr Lucas’s expense, but it had put forth a reprint of Shakespeare’s sonnets already, as well as his own poems. They were printed in blunt type on thick yellowish paper, the edges of which seemed as if they had been cut by the forefinger of an impatient reader, so ragged and irregular were they, and they were bound in vellum, the titles of these two slim flowers of poetry, “Flotsam” and “Jetsam,” were printed in black letter type and the covers were further adorned with a sort of embossed seal and with antique looking tapes so that you could tie it all up with two bows when you had finished with Mr Lucas’s “Flotsam” for the time being, and turned to untie the “Jetsam.”

Today the prose-poem of “Loneliness” had not been getting on very well, and Philip Lucas was glad to hear the click of the garden-gate, which showed that his loneliness was over for the present, and looking up he saw his wife’s figure waveringly presented to his eyes through the twisted and knotty glass of the parlour window, which had taken so long to collect, but which now completely replaced the plain, commonplace unrefracting stuff which was there before. He jumped up with an alacrity remarkable in so solid and well-furnished a person, and had thrown open the nail-studded front-door before Lucia had traversed the path of broken paving-stones, for she had lingered for a sad moment at Perdita’s empty border.

“*Lucia mia*!” he exclaimed. “*Ben arrivata*! So you walked from the station?”

“*Si, Peppino, mio caro*,” she said. “*Sta bene*?”

He kissed her and relapsed into Shakespeare’s tongue, for their Italian, though firm and perfect as far as it went, could not be considered as going far, and was useless for conversational purposes, unless they merely wanted to greet each other, or to know the time. But it was interesting to talk Italian, however little way it went.

“*Molto bene*,” said he, “and it’s delightful to have you home again. And how was London?” he asked in the sort of tone in which he might have enquired after the health of a poor relation, who was not likely to recover. She smiled rather sadly.

“Terrifically busy about nothing,” she said. “All this fortnight I have scarcely had a moment to myself. Lunches, dinners, parties of all kinds; I could not go to half the gatherings I was bidden to. Dear good South Kensington! Chelsea too!”

“*Carissima*, when London does manage to catch you, it is no wonder it makes the most of you,” he said. “You mustn’t blame London for that.”

“No, dear, I don’t. Everyone was tremendously kind and hospitable; they all did their best. If I blame anyone, I blame myself. But I think this Riseholme life with its finish and its exquisiteness spoils one for other places. London is like a railway-junction: it has no true life of its own. There is no delicacy, no appreciation of fine shades. Individualism has no existence there; everyone gabbles together, gabbles and gobbles: am not I naughty? If there is a concert in a private house — you know my views about music and the impossibility of hearing music at all if you are stuck in the middle of a row of people — even then, the moment it is over you are whisked away to supper, or somebody wants to have a few words. There is always a crowd, there is always

food, you cannot be alone, and it is only in loneliness, as Goethe says, that your perceptions put forth their flowers. No one in London has time to listen: they are all thinking about who is there and who isn't there, and what is the next thing. The exquisite present, as you put it in one of your poems, has no existence there: it is always the feverish future."

"Delicious phrase! I should have stolen that gem for my poor poems, if you had discovered it before."

She was too much used to this incense to do more than sniff it in unconsciously, and she went on with her tremendous indictment.

"It isn't that I find fault with London for being so busy," she said with strict impartiality, "for if being busy was a crime, I am sure there are few of us here who would escape hanging. But take my life here, or yours for that matter. Well, mine if you like. Often and often I am alone from breakfast till lunch-time, but in those hours I get through more that is worth doing than London gets through in a day and a night. I have an hour at my music not looking about and wondering who my neighbours are, but learning, studying, drinking in divine melody. Then I have my letters to write, and you know what that means, and I still have time for an hour's reading so that when you come to tell me lunch is ready, you will find that I have been wandering through Venetian churches or sitting in that little dark room at Weimar, or was it Leipsic? How would those same hours have passed in London?

"Sitting perhaps for half an hour in the Park, with dearest Aggie pointing out to me, with thrills of breathless excitement, a woman who was in the divorce court, or a coroneted bankrupt. Then she would drag me off to some terrible private view full of the same people all staring at

and gabbling to each other, or looking at pictures that made poor me gasp and shudder. No, I am thankful to be back at my own sweet Riseholme again. I can work and think here."

She looked round the panelled entrance-hall with a glow of warm content at toeing at home again that quite eclipsed the mere physical heat produced by her walk from the station. Wherever her eyes fell, those sharp dark eyes that resembled buttons covered with shiny American cloth, they saw nothing that jarred, as so much in London jarred. There were bright brass jugs on the window sill, a bowl of pot-pourri on the black table in the centre, an oak settee by the open fireplace, a couple of Persian rugs on the polished floor. The room had its quaintness, too, such as she had alluded to in her memorable essay read before the Riseholme Literary Society, called "Humour in Furniture," and a brass milkcan served as a receptacle for sticks and umbrellas. Equally quaint was the dish of highly realistic stone fruit that stood beside the pot-pourri and the furry Japanese spider that sprawled in a silk web over the window.

Such was the fearful verisimilitude of this that Lucia's new housemaid had once fled from her duties in the early morning, to seek the assistance of the gardener in killing it. The dish of stone fruit had scored a similar success, for once she had said to Georgie Pillson, "Ah, my gardener has sent in some early apples and pears, won't you take one home with you?" It was not till the weight of the pear (he swiftly selected the largest) betrayed the joke that he had any notion that they were not real ones. But then Georgie had had his revenge, for waiting his opportunity he had inserted a real pear among those stony specimens and again passing through with Lucia, he picked it out, and with lips drawn back had snapped at it with all the force of his jaws. For the moment she had felt quite faint at the thought of his teeth crashing into fragments. . . . These humorous touches were

altered from time to time; the spider for instance might be taken down and replaced by a china canary in a Chippendale cage, and the selection of the entrance hall for those whimsicalities was intentional, for guests found something to smile at, as they took off their cloaks and entered the drawing room with a topic on their lips, something light, something amusing about what they had seen. For the gong similarly was sometimes substituted a set of bells that had once decked the collar of the leading horse in a waggoner's team somewhere in Flanders; in fact when Lucia was at home there was often a new little quaintness for quite a sequence of days, and she had held out hopes to the Literary Society that perhaps some day, when she was not so rushed, she would jot down material for a sequel to her essay, or write another covering a rather larger field on "The Gambits of Conversation Derived from Furniture."

On the table there was a pile of letters waiting for Mrs Lucas, for yesterday's post had not been forwarded her, for fear of its missing her — London postmen were probably very careless and untrustworthy — and she gave a little cry of dismay as she saw the volume of her correspondence.

"But I shall be very naughty," she said "and not look at one of them till after lunch. Take them away, *Caro*, and promise me to lock them up till then, and not give them me however much I beg. Then I will get into the saddle again, such a dear saddle, too, and tackle them. I shall have a stroll in the garden till the bell rings. What is it that Nietzsche says about the necessity to *mediterranizer* yourself every now and then? I must *Riseholme* myself."

Peppino remembered the quotation, which had occurreded in a review of some work of that celebrated author, where Lucia had also seen it, and went back, with the force of contrast to aid him, to his prose-poem of "Loneliness," while

his wife went through the smoking-parlour into the garden, in order to soak herself once more in the cultured atmosphere.

In this garden behind the house there was no attempt to construct a Shakespearian plot, for, as she so rightly observed, Shakespeare, who loved flowers so well, would wish her to enjoy every conceivable horticultural treasure. But furniture played a prominent part in the place, and there were statues and sundials and stone-seats scattered about with almost too profuse a hand. Mottos also were in great evidence, and while a sundial reminded you that "*Tempus fugit,*" an enticing resting-place somewhat bewilderingly bade you to "Bide a wee." But then again the rustic seat in the pleached alley of laburnums had carved on its back, "Much have I travelled in the realms of gold," so that, meditating on Keats, you could bide a wee with a clear conscience. Indeed so copious was the wealth of familiar and stimulating quotations that one of her subjects had once said that to stroll in Lucia's garden was not only to enjoy her lovely flowers, but to spend a simultaneous half hour with the best authors. There was a dovecote of course, but since the cats always killed the doves, Mrs Lucas had put up round the desecrated home several pigeons of Copenhagen china, which were both imperishable as regards cats, and also carried out the suggestion of humour in furniture. The humour had attained the highest point of felicity when Peppino concealed a mechanical nightingale in a bush, which sang "Jug-jug" in the most realistic manner when you pulled a string. Georgie had not yet seen the Copenhagen pigeons, or being rather short-sighted thought they were real. Then, oh then, Peppino pulled the string, and for quite a long time Georgie listened entranced to their melodious cooings. That served him out for his "trap" about the real pear introduced among the stone specimens. For in spite of the rarefied atmosphere of culture at Riseholme,

Riseholme knew how to “*desipere in loco*,” and its strenuous culture was often refreshed by these light refined touches.

Mrs Lucas walked quickly and decisively up and down the paths as she waited for the summons to lunch, for the activity of her mind reacted on her body, making her brisk in movement. On each side of her forehead were hard neat undulations of black hair that concealed the tips of her ears. She had laid aside her London hat, and carried a red cotton Contadina’s umbrella, which threw a rosy glow onto the oval of her thin face and its colourless complexion. She bore the weight of her forty years extremely lightly, and but for the droop of skin at the corners of her mouth, she might have passed as a much younger woman. Her face was otherwise unlined and bore no trace of the ravages of emotional living, which both ages and softens. Certainly there was nothing soft about her, and very little of the signs of age, and it would have been reasonable to conjecture that twenty years later she would look but little older than she did today. For such emotions as she was victim of were the sterile and ageless emotions of art; such desires as beset her were not connected with her affections, but her ambitions. Dynasty she had none, for she was childless, and thus her ambitions were limited to the permanence and security of her own throne as queen of Riseholme. She really asked nothing more of life than the continuance of such harvests as she had so plenteously reaped for these last ten years. As long as she directed the life of Riseholme, took the lead in its culture and entertainment, and was the undisputed fountain-head of all its inspirations, and from time to time refreshed her memory as to the utter inferiority of London she wanted nothing more. But to secure that she dedicated all that she had of ease, leisure and income. Being practically indefatigable the loss of ease and leisure troubled her but little and being in extremely comfortable circumstances, she had no need to economise in her

hospitalities. She might easily look forward to enjoying an unchanging middle-aged activity, while generations of youth withered round her, and no star, remotely rising, had as yet threatened to dim her unrivalled effulgence. Though essentially autocratic, her subjects were allowed and even encouraged to develop their own minds on their own lines, provided always that those lines met at the junction where she was station-master. With regard to religion finally, it may be briefly said that she believed in God in much the same way as she believed in Australia, for she had no doubt whatever as to the existence of either, and she went to church on Sunday in much the same spirit as she would look at a kangaroo in the Zoological Gardens, for kangaroos come from Australia.

A low wall separated the far end of her garden from the meadow outside; beyond that lay the stream which flowed into the Avon, and it often seemed wonderful to her that the water which wimpled by would (unless a cow happened to drink it) soon be stealing along past the church at Stratford where Shakespeare lay. Peppino had written a very moving little prose-poem about it, for she had royally presented him with the idea, and had suggested a beautiful analogy between the earthly dew that refreshed the grasses, and was drawn up into the fire of the Sun, and Thought the spiritual dew that refreshed the mind and thereafter, rather vaguely, was drawn up into the Full–Orbed Soul of the World.

At that moment Lucia’s eye was attracted by an apparition on the road which lay adjacent to the further side of the happy stream which flowed into the Avon. There was no mistaking the identity of the stout figure of Mrs Quantock with its short steps and its gesticulations, but why in the name of wonder should that Christian Scientist be walking with the draped and turbaned figure of a man with a tropical

complexion and a black beard? His robe of saffron yellow with a violently green girdle was hitched up for ease in walking, and unless he had chocolate coloured stockings on, Mrs Lucas saw human legs of the same shade. Next moment that debatable point was set at rest for she caught sight of short pink socks in red slippers. Even as she looked Mrs Quantock saw her (for owing to Christian Science she had recaptured the quick vision of youth) and waggled her hand and kissed it, and evidently called her companion’s attention, for the next moment he was salaaming to her in some stately Oriental manner. There was nothing to be done for the moment except return these salutations, as she could not yell an aside to Mrs Quantock, screaming out “Who is that Indian”? for if Mrs Quantock heard the Indian would hear too, but as soon as she could, she turned back towards the house again, and when once the lilac bushes were between her and the road she walked with more than her usual speed, in order to learn with the shortest possible delay from Peppino who this fresh subject of hers could be. She knew there were some Indian princes in London; perhaps it was one of them, in which case it would be necessary to read up Benares or Delhi in the Encyclopaedia without loss of time.

Chapter two

AS SHE TRAVERSED THE smoking-parlour the cheerful sounds that had once tinkled from the collar of a Flemish horse chimed through the house, and simultaneously she became aware that there would be *macaroni au gratin* for lunch, which was very dear and remembering of Peppino. But before setting fork to her piled-up plate, she had to question him, for her mental craving for information was far keener than her appetite for food.

"*Caro*, who is an Indian," she said, "whom I saw just now with Daisy Quantock? They were the other side of il piccolo Avon."

Peppino had already begun his macaroni and must pause to shovel the outlying strings of it into his mouth. But the haste with which he did so was sufficient guaranty for his eagerness to reply as soon as it was humanly possible to do so.

"Indian, my dear?" he asked with the greatest interest.

"Yes; turban and burnous and calves and slippers," she said rather impatiently, for what was the good of Peppino having remained in Riseholme if he could not give her precise and certain information on local news when she returned. His prose-poems were all very well, but as prince-consort he had other duties of state which must not be neglected for the calls of Art.

This slight asperity on her part seemed to sharpen his wits.

"Really, I don't know for certain, Lucia," he said, "for I have not set my eyes on him. But putting two and two together, I

might make a guess.”

“Two and two make four,” she said with that irony for which she was feared and famous. “Now for your guess. I hope it is equally accurate.”

“Well, as I told you in one of my letters,” said he, “Mrs Quantock showed signs of being a little off with Christian Science. She had a cold, and though she recited the True Statement of Being just as frequently as before, her cold got no better. But when I saw her on Tuesday last, unless it was Wednesday, no, it couldn’t have been Wednesday, so it must have been Tuesday —”

“Whenever it was then,” interrupted his wife, brilliantly summing up his indecision.

“Yes; whenever it was, as you say, on that occasion Mrs Quantock was very full of some Indian philosophy which made you quite well at once. What did she call it now? Yoga! Yes, that was it!”

“And then?” asked Lucia.

“Well, it appears you must have a teacher in Yoga or else you may injure yourself. You have to breathe deeply and say ‘Om’——”

“Say what?”

“Om. I understand the ejaculation to be Om. And there are very curious physical exercises; you have to hold your ear with one hand and your toes with the other, and you may strain yourself unless you do it properly. That was the general gist of it.”

“And shall we come to the Indian soon?” said Lucia.

“*Carissima*, you have come to him already. I suggest that Mrs Quantock has applied for a teacher and got him. *Ecco!*”

Mrs Lucas wore a heavily corrugated forehead at this news. Peppino had a wonderful *flair* in explaining unusual circumstances in the life of Riseholme and his conjectures were generally correct. But if he was right in this instance, it struck Lucia as being a very irregular thing that anyone should have imported a mystical Indian into Riseholme without consulting her. It is true that she had been away, but still there was the medium of the post.

“*Ecco* indeed!” she said. “It puts me in rather a difficult position, for I must send out my invitations to my garden-party today, and I really don’t know whether I ought to be officially aware of this man’s existence or not. I can’t write to Daisy Quantock and say ‘Pray bring your black friend Om or whatever his names proves to be, and on the other hand, if he is the sort of person whom one would be sorry to miss, I should not like to have passed over him.”

“After all, my dear, you have only been back in Riseholme half an hour,” said her husband. “It would have been difficult for Mrs Quantock to have told you yet.”

Her face cleared.

“Perhaps Daisy has written to me about him,” she said. “I may find a full account of it all when I open my letters.”

“Depend upon it you will. She would hardly have been so wanting in proper feeling as not to have told you. I think, too, that her visitor must only have just arrived, or I should have been sure to see him about somewhere.”

She rose.

“Well, we will see,” she said. “Now I shall be very busy all afternoon, but by tea-time I shall be ready to see anyone who calls. Give me my letters, *Caro*, and I will find out if Daisy has written to me.”

She turned them over as she went to her room, and there among them was a bulky envelope addressed in Mrs Quantock’s great sprawling hand, which looked at first sight so large and legible, but on closer examination turned out to be so baffling. You had to hold it at some distance off to make anything out of it, and look at it in an abstracted general manner much as you would look at a view. Treated thus, scattered words began to leap into being, and when you had got a sufficiency of these, like glimpses of the country seen by flashes of lightning, you could hope to get a collective idea of it all. The procedure led to the most promising results as Mrs Lucas sat with the sheets at arm’s length, occasionally altering the range to try the effect of a different focus. “Benares” blinked at her, also “Brahmin”; also “highest caste”; “extraordinary sanctity,” and “Guru.” And when the meaning of this latter was ascertained from the article on “Yoga” in her Encyclopaedia, she progressed very swiftly towards a complete comprehension of the letter.

When fully pieced together it was certainly enough to rivet her whole attention, and make her leave unopened the rest of the correspondence, for such a prelude to adventure had seldom sounded in Riseholme. It appeared, even as her husband had told her at lunch, that Mrs Quantock found her cold too obstinate for all the precepts of Mrs Eddy; the True Statement of Being, however often repeated, only seemed to inflame it further, and one day, when confined to the house, she had taken a book “quite at random” from the shelves in her library, under, she supposed, the influence of some interior compulsion. This then was clearly a “leading.”

Mrs Lucas paused a moment as she pieced together these first sentences. She seemed to remember that Mrs Quantock had experienced a similar leading when first she took up Christian Science. It was a leading from the sight of a new church off Sloane Street that day; Mrs Quantock had entered (she scarcely knew why) and had found herself in a Testimony Meeting, where witness after witness declared the miraculous healings they had experienced. One had had a cough, another cancer, another a fractured bone, but all had been cured by the blessed truths conveyed in the Gospel according to Mrs Eddy. However, her memories on this subject were not to the point now; she burned to arrive at the story of the new leading.

Well, the book that Mrs Quantock had taken down in obedience to the last leading proved to be a little handbook of Oriental Philosophies, and it opened, “all of its own accord,” at a chapter called Yoga. Instantly she perceived, as by the unclosing of an inward eye, that Yoga was what she wanted and she instantly wrote to the address from which this book was issued asking for any guidance on the subject. She had read in “Oriental Philosophies” that for the successful practice of Yoga, it was necessary to have a teacher, and did they know of any teacher who could give her instruction? A wonderful answer came to that, for two days afterwards her maid came to her and said that an Indian gentleman would like to see her. He was ushered in, and with a profound obeisance said: “Beloved lady, I am the teacher you asked for; I am your Guru. Peace be to this house! Om!”

Mrs Lucas had by this time got her view of Mrs Quantock’s letter into perfect focus, and she read on without missing a word. “Is it not wonderful, dearest Lucia,” it ran, “that my desire for light should have been so instantly answered? And yet my Guru tells me that it always happens so. I was

sent to him, and he was sent to me, just like that! He had been expecting some call when my letter asking for guidance came, and he started at once because he knew he was sent. Fancy! I don’t even know his name, and his religion forbids him to tell it me. He is just my Guru, my guide, and he is going to be with me as long as he knows I need him to show me the True Path. He has the spare bedroom and the little room adjoining where he meditates and does Postures and Pranyama which is breathing. If you persevere in them under instruction, you have perfect health and youth, and my cold is gone already. He is a Brahmin of the very highest caste, indeed caste means nothing to him any longer, just as a Baronet and an Honourable must seem about the same thing to the King. He comes from Benares where he used to meditate all day by the Ganges, and I can see for myself that he is a person of the most extraordinary sanctity. But he can meditate just as well in my little room, for he says he was never in any house that had such a wonderful atmosphere. He has no money at all which is so beautiful of him, and looked so pained and disappointed when I asked him if I might not give him some. He doesn’t even know how he got here from London; he doesn’t think he came by train, so perhaps he was wafted here in some astral manner. He looked so bewildered too when I said the word ‘money,’ and evidently he had to think what it was, because it is so long since it has meant anything to him. So if he wants anything, I have told him to go into any shop and ask that it shall be put down to me. He has often been without food or sleep for days together when he is meditating. Just think!

“Shall I bring him to see you, or will you come here? He wants to meet you, because he feels you have a beautiful soul and may help him in that way, as well as his helping you. I am helping him too he says, which seems more