

# AN AMERICAN HERO

BY EDWARD VERRALL LUCAS

Mr. Lucas first asked, "Who was William Allen Richardson?" in a talk about the names of roses—new names and old, apt names and odd ones, beautiful and ugly names—in one of the sketches and essays in his little book called "One Day and Another." A rose, he held, should have a name as beautiful and immortal as itself. Particularly the William Allen Richardson rose seems to haunt him, for, at the beginning, middle, and end of the talk, he insistently asks the question of its origin and calls for a "Roses' Who's Who" to answer such conundrums. He asks, "Was he a florist, or an American Senator, or merely a rose-growing gentleman? The name has an Irish smack; at least the only Allens and the only Richardsons I ever knew personally were alike Irish. Is he alive to-day? He might easily be, for the rose bearing his name dates only from 1878—thirty-one years ago. If William Allen Richardson were then, say, forty, he would still be only seventy. How odd to meet him in real life! 'Allow me to introduce you to Mr. William Allen Richardson.' 'Not *the* William Allen Richardson?' you would reply in an awed whisper." At last Mr. Lucas has solved his rose-problem, and just how he tells below.—THE EDITORS.

WHO was William Allen Richardson? Since the publication of the volume of essays in which I so tiresomely pounded this problem many letters have reached me, each with its own solution. All are different; and their differences show how important it was that a warrior for truth should come forward and fling the question in the world's face. For the growth of legend and myth that has been endangering the fame of the noblest deviser of an orange-hearted rose was becoming too rampant. Let me, therefore, who asked the question, now answer it; for I know. By dint of careful pruning I have removed the apocryphal, and the truth remains. William Allen Richardson was— But you must permit me first to narrate some of the experiences of an essayist who indulges in interrogation marks.

The first letter I received—almost immediately after the publication of the book—gave so lucid an account of William Allen Richardson that I began to think I had made too much of the mystery. "Do you really want to know about William Allen Richardson?" it began; and then this story was told: "William Allen Richardson and his wife loved roses, and the ambition of their lives was to raise an orange-colored rose. At last they succeeded, and they called the treasure 'William and Ellen Richardson,' a rather cumbersome title, but meaning much to these two. Alas, the printer would have none

of this sentiment—hence 'William Allen Richardson.'"

I cannot say that this narrative satisfied me; but there was nothing in it to make one violently skeptical. Why should not William and Ellen have lived this idyllic rose-growing life? Why should not their names have been thus intertwined forever, even if a little ungallantly? I had seen barges on the Thames called "William and Ellen," I was sure; why not roses? I therefore went about saying that I now knew the whole history of William Allen Richardson, and the story was not doubted.

But then arrived an anonymous post-card with the Paddington postmark: "I am of no importance and my brother is of no importance, but William Allen Richardson was the brother of my brother's handy man. (At least he said so)." What of William and Ellen after that? For the time, at any rate, the narrative of their fragrant union passed from my repertoire.

That post-card will give you an idea of the lightness with which this matter can be approached. I do not mean that the communication in itself is frivolous, for, though easy in tone, it yet states the case briefly and clearly; the lightness that I complain of is in the attitude of the writer's brother towards this tremendous problem. Here he was, with a handy man claiming to be the own brother of the great William Allen Richardson, and yet doing no more (apparently) than treating

it as a myth—never investigating—never, in short, really caring. Now if I had a handy man whose brother was— But this is boasting, self-approval; and complacent people, conscious of their own rectitude, rarely get at the truth.

Other correspondents followed, all strangers to me, and each with a pet theory. One had it that William Allen Richardson had been gardener to a rose-loving duke. Another, that he was a Scotchman who had gone to France to manage the Ducher nursery. Another, that he was the American editor of a horticultural journal. Then came another more circumstantial story, from a lady in Yorkshire. "I was taught by a dear old country vicar (himself an enthusiastic rose-grower and close friend of Dean Hole) that W. A. Richardson was one of the Quaker firm of Richardson, who had a place near Newry in the north of Ireland." This so chimed in with my own Quakerish suspicions, as expressed in the original essay, that I was inclined to think we might really be at home at last; but meanwhile an American missive was on its way from Louisville, Kentucky, and when it arrived I saw at once that here was Veritas, naked and unshamed.

A certain illustrious statesman who had taken much interest in the matter will be amused to read the Louisville communication. "I have often," he wrote to me, "wondered, and occasionally asked, who W. A. R. was, and have been at times impatient that people should be content to live on without knowing. Now I would almost rather not know, having been disappointed for so long." He went on to say that he suspected W. A. R. to be an American. Well, he was right. Sagacious and far-seeing as ever, he now has another opportunity of pointing to a fulfilled conjecture; for there is no doubt (since I have had corroboration from another transatlantic source) that the following letter is gospel.

The writer, Mr. W. R. Belknap, roundly states himself to be William Allen Richard-

son's nephew. He continues: "William Allen Richardson was born in New Orleans, Louisiana, on February 20, 1819. When he was but two years old, his father moved to Lexington, Kentucky, where he resided until his death, in October, 1892. William Allen Richardson married Miss Mary Short, daughter of Charles Wilkins Short, the botanist, who pursued his favorite studies of botany and horticulture at his country place, Hayfield, some five miles southwest of Louisville. With this congenial companionship, Mr. W. A. Richardson established himself in an adjoining place, Ivywood, and became much interested in the cultivation and propagation of roses. He imported a good many, and in this way became acquainted by correspondence with Madame Ducher (or she may have been called *Veuve Ducher*), at Lyons, France, who was especially interested in a rose which he sent her of a pale-yellow color, and she wrote Mr. Richardson that she had a sport from this rose in her own garden, which, if successful in propagation, she would name for him; hence the name which has interested you as applying to the beautiful copperish-yellow rose. . . . Mr. Richardson lived until 1892 in his country home near here, and would have enjoyed, if he might have foreseen, the interest which his namesake has aroused in the mind of an English writer of to-day like yourself."

And now we know. The secret is out, and the rose will smell no less sweet for it, nor climb less carelessly, nor refresh the eye less graciously. But I adjure America to be more proud of this feather in her cap. I do not suggest that William Allen Richardson should have a monument, for he has one in every right garden more beautiful than marble and very likely more enduring than bronze; but his name should be so deeply cut upon the roll of honor that no one need ever have to ask my question again.

But what a blow to that romantic anecdote about Ellen!