

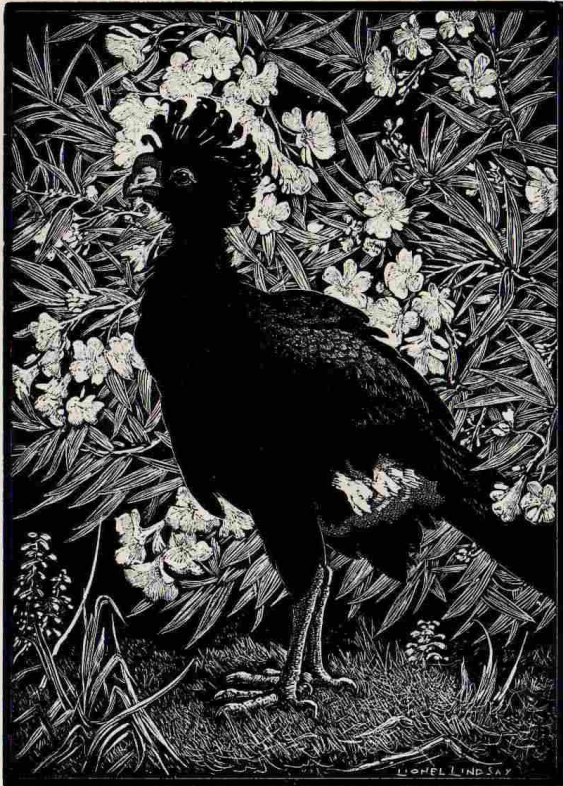
Comedy of Life

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY
BY SIR LIONEL LINDSAY

1874-1961

With a Foreword by Peter Lindsay

ANGUS AND ROBERTSON



A Lionel Lindsay woodcut—"Curassow and Oleander"

on its feet, but Carey had more vanity than brains, and was afraid of a definite policy; he played with reform but with kid gloves on, and lived in fear of libel actions. After giving the staff a dinner to celebrate the success of the paper he went to the seaside, ostensibly for a spell, but really to break the news to us from afar that he could not continue publication. We were sorry for him, but amused at his running away—as if we were not all case-hardened to the death and burial of papers. A few years later, Carey, with the instability of all who awake late to sex and vaunt too insistently the charms of matrimony, migrated to America with his typist.

His abandonment of the *Outpost* hit me hardest, for my brother Percy had been staying with me for a month, and I had spent my last shilling. For three weeks we kept the *Outpost* on its feet by printing it on inferior paper; I cut the cartoons on wood to save expense. One of these was reprinted in England with its legend, "He's a little down on drink, Parson Bobs". It represented Lord Roberts as Stiggins holding up a black-gloved hand in admonition of a drunken Tommy.

II

The Siren Call of *Carmen*

I HAVE come to regard *Carmen* as the determining factor of my life. When a boy I treasured an oleograph of a mantilla'd Spanish lady who with one hand swung lightly and defiantly from the hip, and the other flirting a fan, glanced across her shoulder, a carnation between her lips, challenging, provocative. Years after I discovered it in Madrid to be Madraso's "Carmen". How it reached Creswick in the eighties must remain a mystery, but no Madonna was ever more ardently worshipped. Now when at the time of the demise of the *Outpost* I heard *Carmen* for the first time, with Agnes Jansen in the principal role, the dream crystallized in reality. Life, casual, dramatic, coloured by race and fatality, displaced the flimsy stage figures of Verdi and Wagner, and a music, strange and fascinating, charged with melancholy and sensuality, penetrated and possessed me. Here was something that transcended any stage performance: artifice and convention were ruthlessly swept away. Life, fatal and entrancing, untroubled of any Christian morbidity or sentimentality, ruled the round of the sun or the starlit mystery of night.

Nietzsche's *Contra Wagner* had long been my book of hours, had fortified my love of Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert, and confirmed my distaste of Wagner's windy romanticism; that music without edges which can never satisfy an exacting sense of form.

That first hearing of Bizet's masterpiece was my road to Damascus. I descended the gallery stairs in an ecstasy that transcended wine, and swore that I would be in Spain next year. My friends laughed and said, "All the Spain you'll see will be a bob's worth of *Carmen* from the gallery."

How I lived until Herman Khur, who had agreed to share with me a derelict wooden cottage in East Melbourne, came back from New Zealand I cannot now remember, for the *Bulletin* and *Punch* were closed to me. Jealous as Jehovah, they would suffer no other gods, even such half-gods as the *Outpost*, and extended to my work the cold compliment of the boycott—but I managed to subsist somehow on rice and oatmeal. With two black kittens for company I wrote and drew and worked at Spanish though my chances of getting to Carmen's country seemed now desperately remote. The arrival of Khur's half-share of the rent just averted the seizure of his piano, and the opening of Federal Parliament brought me a note from the editor of the *Weekly Times* to call, just as the rice gave out.

My commission was for a double-page drawing of the House of Parliament with all the members sitting. It was wanted in three days, and I was to be paid £10. How I sweated at the infernal machine. I had to draw half the members in the House as they sat, and all to be picked over and criticized by Carrington, the editor, until he could suggest no further alterations. I worked all through two nights to get it done in time for the block-maker. Dante could have devised no greater torment.

A bushfire in Gippsland, in which a few cocky farmers were burned to death, disturbed the perspective of Mr Carrington's news sense so much that he gave over three-quarters of his space to photographs of smoke, and reduced my drawing to the miserable proportions of a quarter page. But, worse, he proposed to pay me £2 10s. for my hard work. Without one penny to rattle on another in my pocket I refused to accept it. The miserable worm tried to threaten; said I was standing in the way of future work, and that the office rule was to pay only by space rates. I told him that he had commissioned me for £10 to do a double page and had

accepted delivery. I saw the management, which declined to "interfere with the editorial department", and in the end I was forced to accept the meanest pay from the meanest thing I ever encountered in journalism.

Talking years afterwards with Percy Ray, who had come from the *Herald* to the *Evening News* when I was cartoonist, I told him of this experience and that it still rankled. "Well," he said, "we all disliked Carrington: he was such a wowser. During the Boer War I did the cables and he would beg for the flimsies (the telegrams were so called from the tenuity of the paper they were typed on) and take them to his den to gloat. He was always depressed if the number of Boers killed did not reach three figures. Rubbing his hands and screwing up his beady eyes he would actually crow after a big kill."

Suddenly the gods relented. Fred Broomfield, sub-editor of Randolph Bedford's the *Clarion*, refused to abandon the junketings in Sydney that followed the arrival of the Duke of York and I reigned in his stead. It was pleasant work, that entailed the writing up of various enterprises, and the condensing of Australian history, and wassail when my most amiable boss decided that the omens were favourable. At the same hour the *Arena*, a weekly devoted to the ideals of Henry George and the Single Taxpanacea, wanted a cartoonist; so that working day and night like Blake's busy bee I had no time for sorrow. I was earning £5 a week and I saw Spain draw nearer with every pound I banked.

Khur and I were enjoying our wreck of a cottage. It lay back in a tangled garden, ensconced between the high walls of respectability, guarded by a portentous iron fence and gate. Someone had intended to build; had set out the garden; and, conveniently for us, had desisted at the right moment. We paid eight shillings a week for this delightful retreat, and when Norman married and went to Sydney, my elder brother Percy took on the *Hawklet*—that priceless family heirloom—and swelled our cheerful *ménage*. In the front room Khur had his piano, and with Percy's flute and my guitar we made agreeable after-dinner music. We did not like to cut an immense carpet that had come into our possession, and the foot literally sank into its fourfold depths. The foundations had

sunk and the floor was so undulant that the piano had to be wedged level. We slept in the central room and lived in the kitchen, which possessed a good open fireplace. Perce, with the inveterate early-rising habits of the landscape painter, was stirring long before it was comfortable for Khur and myself. "Get up you lazy beggars," he would say, armed with the broom, and if we refused he had the clothes off us, though the pillows generally got him in the very narrow doorway that led to the kitchen.

I did the marketing on my bike, and by the time I was back with a loaf of bread hot from the oven, and the meat, fruit, and vegetables for the day, the porridge was on the table and Khur walking round the kitchen—clad in the airy lightness of shirt and slippers in summer—practising on the French horn.

Rent included, our complete expenses amounted to thirty shillings weekly, and we lived well. Only when we gave a dinner to as many as the kitchen could accommodate was that budget exceeded. In summer we sat under the shade of a great vine that stretched like a Spanish *parra* from the veranda to the neighbouring wall. Here came the Dysons, Ted, Will, and Ambrose; Randolph Bedford, the Parkinsons, Ruff Tremearne, Monty Grover and the two Elkingtons: to talk and discuss everything from opera to Nietzsche. The *Contra Wagner* and *Antichrist* had been my discovery. Up to this Gautier and George Moore had been our spiritual guides, but here was new light, and fresh wind that blew away all that cumbered our ideas, a philosophy founded on physiology, a return to living values, with art enshrined as the praise of life.

How much we owe to Nietzsche, as artist, as stimulus, as the supreme critic of decadence. No one has suffered more from misinterpretation, yet the world owes to him the destruction of Pessimism as philosophy, and a spiritual return to man as the measure of all things.

Known to all our friends as "The House with the Iron Gate", our cottage was rarely without company. It was lucky for me that I had to work at the *Clarion* office and the Library, so that I could get my writing done during the morning. Khur was at the theatre most of his time, and Percy, his week's work finished, painted landscape. I would have

finished my shift of drawing by the time Khur got back from the theatre cursing the filthy music he must perforce play for a living. To get the taste of it from his mind he would rush to his piano and play a Bach fugue, but his natural gaiety would return at our supper of mettwurst and lager.

At the cottage, except in the hot weather, I always wore the abbot's frock lent from the La Poupée wardrobe for an Artists' Carnival in aid of the hospitals. Apologizing one day to Rock Phillips for not having returned it, I was told by the generous property master to keep it. No more delightful winter garment was ever devised. It is superior to the dressing-gown, for the cowl is a defence against draughts. For the writer or draughtsman, or for absolving a gay lady from an easy venality committed with the church—after the manner suggested by the Abbess of Brignoles—I can recommend its discreet amplitude.

And now it is time that I drew the character of my friend Herman Khur, the finest performer on the French horn that ever came south of the line, and a brave soul, staunch, humorous, single-minded. We lived together in perfect amity.

Born at Budapest, he had studied at the Vienna Conservatorium, and had come to Australia in search of a brother, also a musician. He landed at Melbourne guiltless of English, but by repeating the word "Turnverein" was at last understood and directed to the German Club. He found his brother and they both secured positions in Herr Ploch's famous band. But let me tell his story in his own words, as I first heard it when his English was in the making:

"I do not find der goldt in der street like I am told about at home, but it is der good boom time and we blay every night at der Government House, or some big barty. And we live like der fighting cock, for everyone is spending der money like water. Every night my broder and I haf big supper of Wiener Schnitzel or frankfurters and sauerkraut, and oceans of Pilsener. Ven ve haf finish der morning practice ve go about everywhere like gentlemen: it is a goot life. Suddenly der boom she go bust. Ve haf live like der grasshopper; dere is no more Ploch's band and all ve have is eight bound. Vot to do? Ve are musicians. Ve have too much bride to blay in der

street, so ve decide to go in for der commerce. It is my broder who get der bright idea, der milch-vaalk. So ve go to the Kirk's Bazaar and puy der cow mit der eight bound. She is mad as der toller hund. She run round every tree-guard and bost, and by der time ve get her to der suburb ve haf der arms bulled off. Ve tie her up in der back yard and haf a pottle of lager, two, three pottle ve are so thirsty. Der cow she go moo all der night. Ve tink it is for der liddle calf dat she cry, but in der morning ve see it is because we haf forgot to milch her and her bosoms swell, and she is in great bains. So my broder he try to milch her while I bractice der 'Milchio'. Ve put der milch in der can and I go out to sell him. But it is too late. Der vives are talk about each other over der back fence, and I have der stage vrights, I cannot say der milchio, so I come pack of all der wives haf bought der milch for der day. So my broder and I buy some Queensland rum and use up der milch. Next day ve take back der cow to der Kirk's Bazaar and sell her for five bound. So you see we loose three bound in two days: it is no goot for der artist to go in for der commerce."

Nature had been grossly unfair to the Count, for his fine head and torso were supported by stocky but over-short legs. Moffitt delighted to set him disputing with Josephi, a Swedish violinist, slight as Khur was sturdy, but of the same height. Josephi was fair and had a shrill voice; Khur's was deep and resonant, and to hear him accuse Josephi of living in sin with his parrot was unprintably funny. The little Swede had a passion for pornographic literature, and I shall not easily forget his disgust in receiving a book that he had ordered from England on *The Immorality of the English Stage*, to find it a counterblast from the pulpit.

Khur's humour was like that of the Good Soldier Schweik. Puffing at his Kruger pipe as he walked the yard when he lived with Norman, Conant, and De B, he remarked to Con, who was rehearsing for a Saturday night with the barnstormers, "Ach, Gonant, it is no goot, even in der suburb you will not persuade dem dot you are a gentleman."

At that period, as the times grew worse with no concerts

and half the theatres closed, he decided to go hop-picking in Gippsland, and tramped down accompanied by his French horn. One night, late, a banging at the street door reached our attics, and Coates went down. He returned with a figure like a gnome in a German fairytale. It was Khur, burnt as a gipsy, garlanded with hop-vines, his horn in its green baize bag under his arm, and cursing "der blooda country" like our army in Flanders. Could we put him up for the night?

Having disposed of himself for the biggest bloody fool in the universe, he said, "I tink it will be like der Vanderjahre ven I sleep under der tree ven der liddle birds vake me up and I blay to dem on my horn. But it is nod nice to sleep in der bush mit no plankets, and der hop-pickers are not nice too. Dey do nod dance, dey do nod sing, ven drink they fight, and der beer is hot like der varm vater. I am nod so tall as the hob hole and all I make is a pob a day. So I come pack." We fixed him up on the floor on some mats, and as he lay back in his blankets smoking, we asked him if he were comfortable. "Heerlich! I feel like der plooda king making lofe to der plooda queen."

In time Khur's command of the language enabled him to enjoy Chaucer and Burns, and to think in English. He never lost his Germanic accent, but it added a grace to his humour.

Out of the symposiums at our cottage grew the Ishmael Club, a fellow to the Dawn and Dusk Club of Sydney. It was Randolph's idea. Norman carved a delightful god: a Maori wower with flowing side-whiskers and hands folded, thumbs up, across his belly, and crowned with a black tin bell-topper. We met to dine every fortnight, generally in a private room at a hotel or at Fasoli's, where the Italian food was very good. As is usual with most literary dining clubs, we began with ritual. The Ishmael Prayer, written by Randolph, who was well versed in the Old Testament, would have lifted the hat off a parson. But after we had elected all the immortals in art and history into the Ishmael Heaven, and consigned our antipathies to a proper limbo, we played the fool in true Falstaffian fashion. It was great fun debating the merits of borderline candidates for immortality; for each member had

to support with an essay the claims of his postulant for Parnassus. We set up cock-shies like Calvin, Loyola, Wesley, Marie Corelli and Hall Caine, Tolstoy, Thackeray, and Ibsen, and all bigots and traducers of life and art.

One night at Fasoli's—the dining-room had open arches that served as a partition to the café—we had reached the stage of playing the fool, and our subject for the occasion was "The Revolution and Up the Republic". Will Dyson was inimitable as a Yarra-bank orator fiercely denouncing "the blood-sucking capitalist" for "living on the unearned excrement of the working classes, and grinding the faces of the poor with the iron heel of despotism", while Randolph in the role of Danton made such a Bastille-shaking harangue, that old Fasoli, who had fought with Garibaldi, after listening and consuming more of his own wine than was good for him, got so excited that he shouted "Eviva, eviva!", rushed into the room and shouted that he was ready to tear down that edifice "and planta da little red flag on da top of da Parliament House".

As we sometimes kicked up too much noise for even a pub, we rented a room and installed a few second-hand chairs. This was in the building in which the catchpole had seized our effects. One cold night when Randolph as the good old man, Ted Dyson as the cantankerous old mother, and Bill as the blackguard son were playing an extempore domestic farce, and our firewood was exhausted, I thought of our old room and suggested that we should see if anything burnable had been left. Putting his powerful shoulder to the door Jack Elkington forced the lock, and there stood my smashed cheval glass and all our ancient household goods. These we broke up and burnt at several successive meetings.

One hot Sunday night Randolph dropped into the cottage and invited us to come to the pub and drink cold lager. We suggested that he had forgotten the day. "Not at all," he said, and led us to a passage-way, at the side of Sir William Clarke's mansion "Cliveden" enclosed by brick walls. Behind lay the neatest little tavern in the world. With our thirst accentuated by the heat and the pleasure of the unexpected—never had beer tasted so good—we were quaffing a second schooner when a cheerful bull-terrier joined the company. Always

fond of dogs, my brother Percy patted and fondled the dog which responded by gratefully pawing him. Suddenly Percy cried "B'God what a stink", and confirmed the observation by smelling his hand. The cleanest of men, Percy was disgusted. It was the nightman's dog. Struck with an idea, Randolph pulled out his watch, went to the passage and listened, told us to finish our beer and to do exactly as he ordered. He led us to the street opening, glanced towards the city and leant an ear to the passage. A trickle of people returning from church began to pass. As the flow increased he said, "Now block the footpath with your backs to the city." We spanned the pave and presented four backs to the mechanically halted crowd. Then as we were aware of heavy footsteps in the passage, Randolph's strong voice rang out in stern command, "Hats off in the presence of the dead." We instantly whipped off our hats with military precision, and the crowd more reverently, as the nightman, bearing the great can, lumbered across the road to his waiting tumbril, the evidence of his calling diffused upon the evening air.

How often have I laughed remembering that perfection of farce and the artist in life who grasped in a flash the humorous possibilities of the moment, linked the nightman's call with the homing churchgoers, and timed the dénouement to a second. If that is not evidence of genius there is no meaning left to the word.

Scatological humour, when it is true humour, transcends like Rabelais its dirt. Lifted by the magic of words, and the fitness of the occasion into the region of art, it soars above the proscriptions of little men. It is a defence and arm against the authority of the bigot and all tyrannies that would fetter the spirit of man. Let us remember that, as Nietzsche said, "It is his bum-gut that prevents man thinking himself a demi-god."

Well, the world should have grown tired of its demi-gods by this: of Hitler, Stalin, and Mussolini, all vacant of humour, as of measure and humanity. The great sanity lives in humour, that no more than the spirit of poetry shall wear fetters, and never was the world wanting a Rabelais as today. We hear of New Worlds, of new orders, of restoring a wise Liberalism,

and have not yet achieved what Rabelais the educator so clearly sets out in *Thélème*. Who has satirized war, and bigotry, and all the spoilers of mankind like the "prince de toute sapience et de toute comédie"? I have loved and read him this fifty years, and find him like Shakespeare fresh, inexhaustible, a stimulus and inspiration. When I am depressed I lose my boredom in his pages, and in that noble *Revue des Etudes Rabelaisiennes*, the only set in Australia, upon which a Labour Government inflicted a tax of £12 when in the sublime of dementia it placed a duty upon all books. Well, to be exact, not all, for it lifted the tax from the Bible, in which votes were involved.

When man loses his sense of humour it will be time for him to perish from the planet. The sex joke and the scatological impropriety date from before Eden. Born of life, and imagination, they startle existence by disturbing the spirit of gravity, which weighs like fate upon it. Are we to forget that humour is the great cathartic, the one essence that lifts us above the beasts and the poor in spirit? No need to apologize for Rabelais' coarseness as of his age or cover for satire. It was as much a part of the man as his passion for knowledge—the very salt of his wisdom. So a little more coarseness, gentlemen, but of the right kind; that of Burns and Shakespeare and Rabelais. And, that it may not perish from the memory of man, another of Randolph's pranks—

A push of larrikins had broken into a Roman Catholic Church at Coburg and set upon the altar the can from a latrine. Profanation, apart the grossness of the act, had shocked the public conscience, and stirred the unquenchable enmities of north and south. As he walked home one evening, at peace with the world and good liquor, Randolph paused to read the sign that decorated a local hall. A great Orange rally was in session. Attracted by any monkey show, he walked in and mounted the platform where the horse-collars were assembled in force. "What lodge, Brother?" said the Tadger in charge. "Loyal Orange Defender Number Thirty-five," said the impressive delegate—his omnivorous observation had collected the title a week before. A miserable little runt now got up to address the meeting. His voice had "tones that

jarred"; and Randolph, rising to his feet and the occasion, addressed the chair in stentorian tones: "I move, Brother, that this person be no longer heard. He has bugs in his whiskers." Uproar, and the demand "withdraw and apologize". "I withdraw, brothers, but I cannot apologize; the bugs are not in his whiskers, they are in his voice. But you have heard enough of this inconsequential person, and I am here on a special mission, deputed by my lodge, the Loyal Defenders Number Thirty-five, to congratulate our president on the great blow dealt to Rome, a blow that, like the Battle of the Boyne, shall reverberate to the farthest bourne of history. It was nobly conceived and gloriously executed. And it is to you, Grand and Worshipful Master, that I offer the thanks of all true Orangemen, for your splendid deed when you deposited that can on the altars of the scarlet woman at Coburg." The gratified smile that this lordly peroration had kindled was extinguished as by magic, and the Grand and Worshipful screamed, "It's a lie." "Brother, you are too modest. The crown is yours, the crown of glory, the martyr's crown, for in as much as ye do it unto one of these—" "Police!" Was there ever such a fellow?

The round of life had never been so pleasant, with plenty of work, the merriest of friends, kind girls, and Spain assured by a mounting bank balance. A goal of sorts, that is the secret of all equilibrium in life; something to work towards and possible of attainment. I worked a little at Spanish every night, determined to add ten words a day to my vocabulary, as advised by Richard Burton. Unfortunately all the Spaniards in Melbourne were from Catalonia and spoke their particular dialect; and though I got my first taste of Spain when I visited Señor Parer's farm with his nephew, my friend Tony Clota, it was not till I had discovered a cork-cutter working for the Spanish firm of San Miguel that I could come at the right pronunciation of the noble tongue of Cervantes. My Spaniard, Rafael Paez, hailed from Seville; a little chap, but strong and quick, with a pale olive skin and a proud expression. He had but one eye, bright, black as jet, and the loss of the other marred a face that was touched with race, as I was to discover later. I paid him by the lesson, and we dined together

in the kitchen on Saturday nights, finishing our meal with a copa of anisette and Havana cigarettes which touched the palate of memory, so that we sometimes strayed from the lesson to talking of bullfights, and dancing and music. Rafael played the guitar and would sing snatches from *sainetes* or *flamenco*. He had seen such masters as Massentini, Largarico, and Guerrita, the Velasquez of bullfighting, whom I was to meet in Cordoba, and he enlightened me in expressive pantomime on the art and practice of the ring.

One night I took him to a prize-fight. He was immeasurably shocked. To receive blows in the face: that was impossible. No Spaniard would suffer such insult. I laughed and explained that our boxers were so hard and so well trained that they scarcely felt the blows; that to keep your temper was often to win a fight, and that blows counted as points in a decision when there was no knock-out. The idea of art in boxing had never occurred to him, but appealed to that sense of artistry which takes from bullfighting its manifest cruelty; and when I departed for Spain little Rafael was the complete ring-sider and never missed a fight of consequence.

I had saved £120 in a year. My passage to Marseilles third class cost £22. I had a draft on London for £78. So with £20 in my pocket, a guitar, a rug, and a Gladstone bag, after a gay farewell, I took the train to Sydney to spend a fortnight with Norman.

Sydney and N.L.

NORMAN was settled in an old terrace at Blue's Point, a quiet nook that has long disappeared, like so much more that constituted the charm of Sydney. The harbour lay to the rear, and a ferry at the foot of the street made a slow crossing every half-hour. Not that we troubled it much, as we had so much to talk about. I was delighted to remark the advance in my brother's work. His pen style had taken on colour and richness, which had been inspired by the Moreton Bay fig. The deep-toned foliage, in conjunction with figures, had set him a new problem, which was resolved in the first romantic drawing of himself and Panurge in the company of ladies. He was also writing, all for the pleasure of illustrating it, a typical Plautus Roman comedy in which a rascally slave abets a son in his pursuit of Venus by robbing his miserly father. Later he followed this habit in writing *Saturdee* and *Redbeap*, and here a few words upon his literary excursions may not be out of place.

On my return from the Observatory, at the end of my fifteenth year, I kept a diary for about six months. It contained all the daily doings of the lads of the village; it was eloquent of ladies and by-drinkings, and bore witness to a passionate love of tobacco, beer, and belles-lettres. The style was execrable, pedantic reflections on life and poetry were interspersed with oblations to Venus—the latter prudently