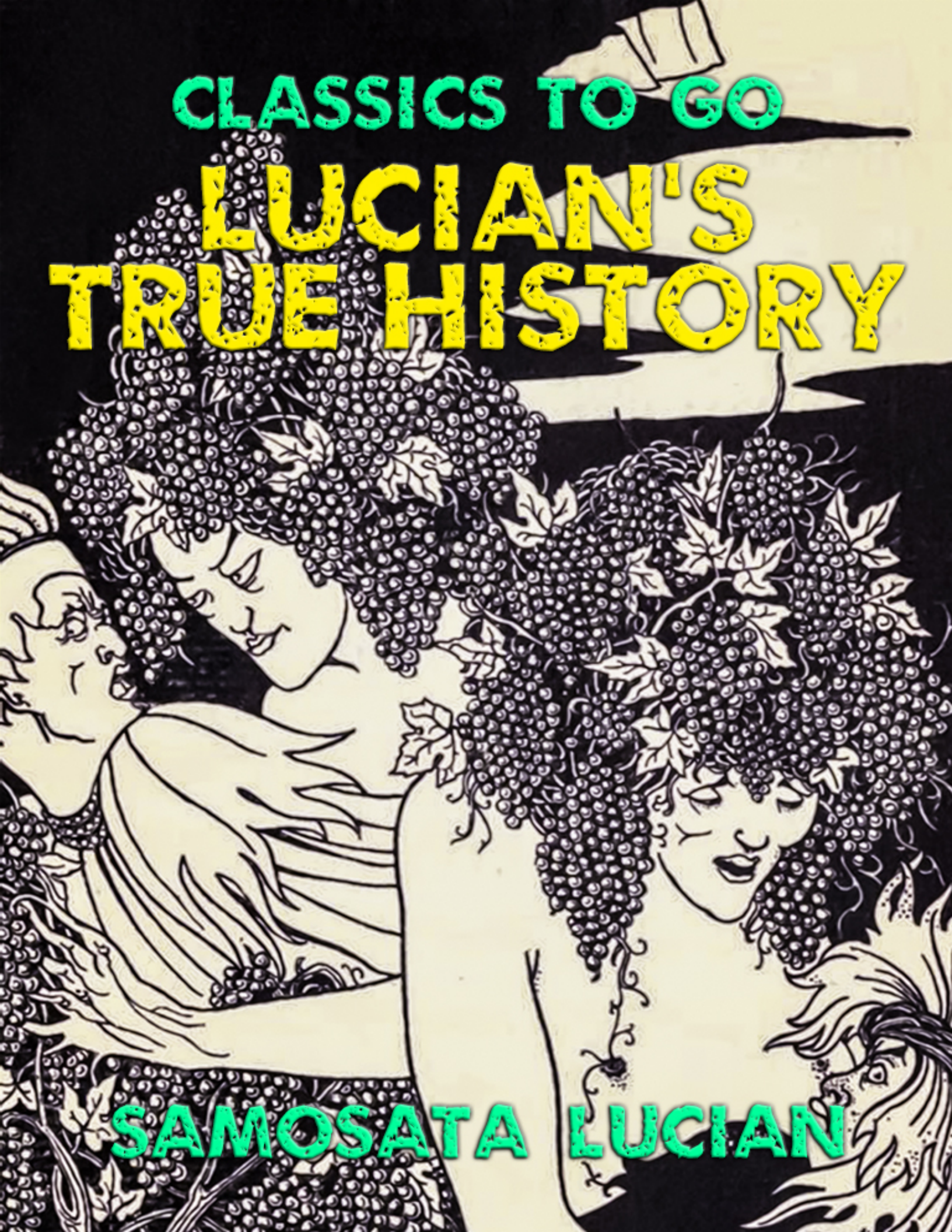
CLASSICS TO GO

LUCIAN'S TRUE HISTORY



SAMOSATA LUCIAN

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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS.

INTRODUCTION.

It is a commonplace of criticism that Lucian was the first of the moderns, but in truth he is near to our time because of all the ancients he is nearest to his own. With Petronius he shared the discovery that there is material for literature in the debased and various life of every day—that to the seeing eye the individual is more wonderful in colour and complexity than the severely simple abstraction of the poets. He replaced the tradition, respected of his fathers, by an observation more vivid and less pedantic than the note-book of the naturalist. He set the world in the dry light of truth, and since the vanity of mankind is a constant factor throughout the ages, there is scarce a page of Lucian's writing that wears the faded air of antiquity. His personages are as familiar to-day as they were in the second century, because, with his pitiless determination to unravel the tangled skein of human folly, he never blinded his vision to their true qualities. And the multiplicity of his interest is as fresh as his penetration. Nothing came amiss to his eager curiosity. For the first time in the history of literature (with the doubtful exception of Cicero) we encounter a writer whose ceaseless activity includes the world. While others had declared themselves poets, historians, philosophers, Lucian comes forth as a man of letters. Had he lived to-day, he would have edited a newspaper, written leading articles, and kept his name ever before the public in the magazines. For he possessed the qualities, if he avoided the defects, of the journalist. His phrase had not been worn by constant use to imbecility; his sentences were not marred by the association of commonness; his style was still his own and fit for the expression of a personal view. But he noted such types and incidents as make an immediate, if perennial,

appeal, and to study him is to be convinced that literature and journalism are not necessarily divorced.

The profession was new, and with the joy of the innovator Lucian was never tired of inventing new genres. Romance, criticism, satire—he mastered them all. In *Toxaris* and *The Ass* he proves with what delicacy and restraint he could handle the story. His ill-omened apprenticeship to a sculptor gave him that taste and feeling for art which he turned to so admirable an account. He was, in fact, the first of the art-critics, and he pursued the craft with an easy unconsciousness of the heritage he bequeathed to the world. True, he is silent concerning the technical practice of the Greeks; true, he leaves us in profound ignorance of the art of Zeuxis, whose secrets he might have revealed, had he been less a man of letters. But he found in painting and sculpture an opportunity for elegance of phrase, and we would forgive a thousand shortcomings for such inspirations of beauty as the smile of Sosandra: το τὸ μειδίαμα σεμνὸν καὶ λεληθὸς. In literary criticism he was on surer ground, and here also he leaves the past behind. His knowledge of Greek poetry was profound; Homer he had by heart; and on every page he proves his sympathies by covert allusion or precise quotation. His treatise concerning the Writing of History[1] preserves its force irresistible after seventeen centuries, nor has the wisdom of the ages impeached or modified this lucid argument. With a modest wit he compares himself to Diogenes, who, when he saw his fellow-citizens busied with the preparations of war, gathered his skirts about him and fell to rolling his tub up and down. So Lucian, unambitious of writing history, sheltered himself from "the waves and the smoke," and was content to provide others with the best of good counsel. Yet such is the irony of accident that, as Lucian's criticism has outlived the masterpieces of Zeuxis, so the historians have snatched an immortality from his censure; and let it be remembered for

his glory that he used Thucydides as a scourge wherewith to beat impostors. But matters of so high import did not always engross his humour, and in *The Illiterate Book-buyer*[2] he satirizes a fashion of the hour and of all time with a courage and brutality which tear the heart out of truth. How intimately does he realize his victim! And how familiar is this same victim in his modern shape! You know the very streets he haunts; you know the very shops wherein he is wont to acquire his foolish treasures; you recognize that not by a single trait has Lucian dishonoured his model. In yet another strange instance Lucian anticipated the journalist of to-day. Though his disciples know it not, he invented the interview. In that famous visit to the Elysian Fields, which is a purple patch upon his masterpiece, *The True History*, he "went to talk with Homer the Poet, our leisure serving us both well," and he put precisely those questions which the modern hack, note-book in hand, would seek to resolve. First, remembering the seven cities, he would know of Homer what fatherland claimed him, and when the poet "said indeed he was a Babylonian, and among his own countrymen not called Homer but Tigranes," Lucian straightly "questioned him about those verses in his books that are disallowed as not of his making;" whereto Homer replied with a proper condemnation of Zenodotus and Aristarchus. And you wonder whether Lucian is chastising his contemporaries or looking with the eye of a prophet into the future.

But even more remarkable than his many-coloured interest is Lucian's understanding. He was, so to say, a perfect Intelligence thrown by accident into an age of superstition and credulity. It is not only that he knew all things: he saw all things in their right relation. If the Pagan world had never before been conscious of itself, it had no excuse to harbour illusions after his coming. Mr. Pater speaks of the intellectual light he turned upon dim places, and truly no corner of life

escaped the gleam of his lantern. Gods, philosophers, necromancers, yielded up their secrets to his enquiry. With pitiless logic he criticized their extravagance and pretension; and actively anticipating the spirit of modern science, he accepted no fact, he subscribed to no theory, which he had not examined with a cold impartiality.

Indeed, he was Scepticism in human shape, but as the weapon of his destruction is always raillery, as he never takes either himself or his victims with exaggerated seriousness, you may delight in his attack, even though you care not which side wins the battle. His wit was as mordant as Heine's own;—is it fantastical to suggest that Lucian too carried Hebrew blood in his veins?—yet when the onslaught is most unsparing he is still joyous. For a gay contempt, not a bitter hatred, is the note of his satire. And for the very reason that his scepticism was felt, that it sprang from a close intimacy with the follies of his own time, so it is fresh and familiar to an age that knows not Zeus. Not even the *Dialogues of the Gods* are out of date, for if we no longer reverence Olympus, we still blink our eyes at the flash of ridicule. And might not the *Philopseudes*, that masterly analysis of ghostly terrors, might not *Alexander the False Prophet*, have been written yesterday?

And thus we arrive at Lucian's weakness. In spite of its brilliance and flippancy, his scepticism is at times over-intelligent. His good sense baffles you by its infallibility; his sanity is so magnificently beyond question, that you pray for an interlude of unreason. The sprightliness of his wit, the alertness of his fancy, mitigate the perpetual rightness of his judgment. But it must be confessed that for all his delicate sense of ridicule he cherished a misguided admiration of the truth. If only he had understood the joy of self-deception, if only he had realized more often (as he realized in *The Ass*) the delight of throwing probability to the winds, we had regarded him with a more constant affection.

His capital defect sprang from a lack of the full-blooded humour which should at times have led him into error. And yet by an irony it was this very love of truth which suggested *The True History*, that enduring masterpiece of phantasy. Setting out to prove his hatred of other men's lies, he shows himself on the road the greatest liar of them all. "The father and founder of all this foolery was Homer's Ulysses": thus he writes in his Preface, confessing that in a spirit of emulation he "turned his style to publish untruths," but with an honester mind, "for this one thing I confidently pronounce for a truth, that I lie." Such is the spirit of the work, nor is there the smallest doubt that Lucian, once embarked upon his voyage, slipped from his ideal, to enjoy the lying for its own sake. If *The True History* fails as a parody, that is because we care not a jot for Ctesias, Iambulus and the rest, at whom the satire is levelled. Its fascination, in fact, is due to those same qualities which, in others, its author affected to despise. The facile variety of its invention can scarce be matched in literature, and the lies are told with so delightful an unconcern, that belief is never difficult. Nor does the narrative ever flag. It ends at the same high level of falsehood in which it has its beginning. And the credibility is increased by the harmonious consistency of each separate lie. At the outset the traveller discovers a river of wine, and forthwith travels up stream to find the source, and "when we were come to the head" (to quote Hickes's translation), "no spring at all appeared, but mighty vine trees of infinite number, which from their roots distilled pure wine, which made the river run so abundantly." So conclusive is the explanation, that you only would have wondered had the stream been of water. And how admirable is the added touch that he who ate fish from the river was made drunk! Then by a pleasant gradation you are carried on from the Hippogypians, or the Riders of Vultures, every feather in whose wing is bigger and longer than the mast of a tall ship, from the fleas as big as