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INTRODUCTION

It is more than a hundred years since W. H. Hudson was born on the South American pampas, in a house romantically named *Los Viente-cinco Ombú*—the Twenty-Five Ombú Trees—and more than fifty since *Green Mansions*, the best known, most successful and perhaps the best loved of his South American romances, was published. By that date Hudson, although taking to writing only in middle life—in his early twenties he was in fact still unable to spell and he wrote English badly—had already published fourteen books, including *The Purple Land*, the first and to my mind the loveliest of his four romantic tales, and the splendid volume of short stories *El Ombú*, which contained his own favourite among his fiction, *Marta Rigueleme*. He had still to publish, after that date, another fourteen books, including the autobiography that together with *Green Mansions* established his reputation in America—*Far Away and Long Ago*—a work even more exquisitely evocative than its title, to which Galsworthy contributed a preface proclaiming Hudson not only “of the writers of our time the rarest spirit,” but also, quite correctly as it has turned out, a prophet crying in the wilderness we now know as subtopia.

English literature affords us the names of several writers who, brought up and nourished on the cool, calm pastures of these islands eventually grew up to experience an adult hunger for the heat and flamboyance of tropical, romantic places. Maugham turning his face from fashionable Edwardian London towards the East and the South Seas; D. H. Lawrence forsaking his blackened and wounded Midlands for Australia and Mexico; Robert Louis Stevenson turning from the Highlands and “Auld Reekie” to Tahiti and Samoa—these are the immediately obvious examples. But Hudson stands apart, almost alone, with the possible exception of Kipling, as a writer who, though born on the other side of the world, found his profoundest spiritual affinities in the hedgerows and woods of England, in their robins and primroses, their cuckoos and cowslips, while at the same time never losing the quality of being able to bring to the land of his birth the tenderest allegiance and the most vivid, most affectionate spirit of evocation,

Their two domains of Hudson's, though physically so different

and territorially so far apart, cannot be separated in any assessment of all or part of his work. Territorial and climatic differences are of infinitesimal consequence here, if of any consequence at all. Nature is at the core of all Hudson's work, whether he is describing the astonishing organ-bird of South America or the return of the chiff-chaff to England in spring time, and it is not surprising that Conrad, in one unerringly perceptive sentence, said of him "one can't tell how this fellow gets his effects—he writes as the grass grows." The element of nature was in fact not merely a powerful extraneous influence on Hudson; nor was it a facile and flexible process by which he could bring himself into closer communication with birds, flowers, animals and the silences of the pampas and the English sky. Hudson and nature are one; on his own confession they exist as an indissoluble unity:

"The blue sky, the brown soil beneath, the grass, the trees, the animals, the wind, the rain and the stars are never strange to me; for I am in, and of, and am one, with them; and my flesh and the soil are one, and the heat in my blood and in the sunshine are one, and the winds and the tempests and the passions are one. I feel the strangeness only with regard to my fellow-men."

In this passage there is to be found, I think, the key to much, perhaps all, of Hudson. It is in the first place a perfect exhibition, though merely one of hundreds of such perfect examples, of Hudson the stylist, the man who writes as the grass grows: fresh, lucid, almost biblically simple, sensitive, fastidious, visual, captivating, the creator of a style that instantly appeals, as his friend Edward Garnett well said of it, "alike to the mind, the heart and the senses." The passage also expresses beyond doubt, I think, that the man who wrote it was a person of the strongest visionary instincts, of the most powerful poetic sensibility. Nor is the order of words—flesh and soil and heat and blood and sunshine and winds and tempests and passions—merely a casual or accidental one. The heat and beat of blood and sun are the same single elemental pulse; they pour out into the same single sensuous fountain.

The key helps to unlock, too, the door to *Green Mansions*. Ernest Hemingway has described *The Purple Land*, its predecessor written twenty years earlier, "as a very sinister book if read too late in life." He describes it as recounting "splendid imaginary amorous adventures of a perfect English gentleman in an intensely romantic land, the scenery of which is very well described." It is true that Hemingway was merely using *The Purple Land* as a means of introducing a character of mildly ingenuous qualities

who was inclined to bring to most of life a certain naivety of trust and purpose, especially where women were concerned, but the description of *The Purple Land* as a source of danger to persons approaching middle-age is nevertheless neither an inapt nor a wholly improbable one. With its captivating gallery of dark, handsome, flashingly ardent South American young women, *The Purple Land* is a romantically vivid, disturbing, highly sensuous book; and so, in another way, is *Green Mansions*.

The book begins rather slowly, possibly even a little tediously, with a prologue that, quite short though it now is, the reader of to-day may well find superfluous and clumsy. How much more slowly it originally began one can only guess from Edward Garnett's statement that the original MS. was declined by an eminent publisher on the grounds that "it sent him to sleep"—or so Hudson "laughingly told me"—and that Garnett himself advised the deletion of "a long introductory portion of the narrative." Hudson was perfectly aware of the lurking tedium of the book's early chapters, which he well described in a letter to Garnett towards the end of 1903. "The introductory chapters seem too slow," he wrote; "the story doesn't move at all, it simply sits and stews contentedly in its own juice; and it doesn't even stew, or boil, *à barbottoner*, but simmers placidly away, like a sauce-pot of cocoa-nibs that has all the day before it."

No acceleration of the story's movement is really noticeable, in fact, for nearly forty pages. It is not until almost the end of Chapter 2—really Chapter 3 if we count the prologue—that the first sudden flash of excitement leaps across pages that have hitherto been given up almost wholly to Hudson's careful, leisurely, half-somnolent description of the South American jungle. It is almost as if Hudson himself had been fearful of straining the credulity of his readers in what he had to introduce to them. "In this place I witnessed a new thing, and had a strange experience," he writes and by the end of the Chapter we have heard, for the first time, in a thrilling and exquisite description, the half-bird-like, half-human voice of Hudson's forest girl, his Rima.

It is small wonder, I think, that Hudson may have felt a certain timidity, if not a reluctance, in introducing his heroine, for he was by this time experienced enough as a writer of fiction to appreciate fully, perhaps with a combination of excitement and dismay, the task that lay before him. The conception he had to offer was far from a commonplace one. "In Rima," as Edward Garnett points out, "Hudson has fused in magical fashion his passion for bird-life and his feeling for woman's beauty." Rima

is indeed an ethereal conception, herself the last mysterious "survivor of a mysterious vanished race," half-bird, half-woman, a creature as fascinating in the lush forest surroundings that hide her so long from view as the sirens and mermaids who in their legendary fashion are said to lure sailors at sea.

But the task of the writer of fiction does not end with the most essential feature of his art, namely, that of invention. Without the power of invention it is certain that no writer can begin to call himself a novelist. Invention is, however, merely the beginning of his task. The rest of it is to persuade the reader, even to dupe him, into an acceptance of a final belief in even the smallest and most unlikely brush-stroke across the canvas of his invented picture. His fiction, however far-fetched, must be accepted as reality; the creatures and scenes conceived by his imagination must appear to contain "a greater truth in essence than the work which purports to be all true." By a process insistent, subtle and unflagging in its compulsion the writer must persuade the reader into final, unqualified acceptance of what he projects on the page.

His preliminary task in all this is first to persuade himself. Every writer of fiction is familiar with the agonising experience of having conceived a character or characters, a situation or situations, and then of discovering in himself a chill and creeping reluctance to persuade himself of their own worth and reality or alternatively of having to face the discouraging and sometimes brutal discovery that his powers, both imaginative and material, are inadequate to carry the project through. Conception, in other words, may often be the result of an experience both delicious and facile; it is the labour of delivery that is the long, forbidding, fearful and often frightening part of birth.

It is my own feeling that Hudson, having conceived his ethereal heroine as a union of bird and woman, may well have found the task before him a thrilling but intimidating one. His slowness in bringing himself to present her in the flesh is, I feel, no clumsy accident. His own metaphor of the simmering pot, in reference to the first pages of the book, is neither idle nor inapt. He was indeed warming himself up through the process of self-persuasion preparing himself for a task as forbiddingly intricate as a novelist has ever set himself.

His progressive triumph through the remainder of the book is due to several causes. Nature, in the form of the South American forest that he had known from boyhood and loved so much and described so marvellously, is the constant protagonist in his tragic-poetic drama of Rima and the thrilled, agonised young Abel. He

cannot go wrong there; passage after passage of extreme beauty proclaim the extraordinary vigour and brilliance of his vision. He is also a poet, gifted with profound sources of sensibility on which, as his story grows in tenacity and movement, he can draw almost limitlessly; the heat and beat of blood and sun fuse into the single motive power that carries him forward to defeat his obstacles. His atmosphere becomes conclusive; it compels and carries us away. He is also experienced enough in the material mysteries of the story-teller's art to know that ethereal concepts need, for their final pressure of conviction, an occasional dose of earthliness; artfully, but with that apparent artlessness that is a feature of all his writing whether it describes the Patagonian plains or an adder basking in the New Forest sun, he interlaces romance and reality. He ties his tale to earth; he uses prosaic fact, as Defoe did so often before him, to persuade the reader into unqualified acceptance of situations in which it would otherwise be hard, perhaps impossible, to believe. His vision and his genius are in fact two-fold: on the one hand intensely mystic, on the other capable of the fidelity of the trained and experienced naturalist to the matters and creatures of earth. His purest creation in the book is Rima, an intensely sublimated personal concept of bird-woman with which he was undoubtedly in love, but it is also his pictures of the old rascal Nuflo, the grim savage Runi, his mother Cla-Cla and the rest of the South American Indians that create the frame in which she finally sits with tragic reality.

Hudson, in later life, as a man growing brusque and old in a world growing more and more under the compulsion of machines, was several times confronted with what seems to be the incredible charge of cynicism. "There is something infinitely tragic in this spectacle of a warm-hearted man turning cynic in his declining years," wrote a critic in 1924, at the same time describing *Green Mansions* as "the fairy story of a boy ignorant of his life," whatever that may be held to mean. It would be truer to say, I think, that *Green Mansions* is a parable, half-earthly, half-ethereal, in which infinite innocence and mortal flesh conflict, the concept of a visionary who, though far from cynical, nevertheless found birds more to his liking than most of the qualities of his fellow men. It is not at all surprising indeed that Hudson chose to enshrine this love of birds in an image of his imagination such as Rima, for there is about him a certain innocence, far removed from mere naivety, which springs straight and divinely from nature: a quality that has been called his intactness. "His intactness does not merely belong to the romance in him but to the soul; for he, if any man,

had that essence, and the shy aerial life of birds might have been a symbol of it to him."

Green Mansions does not belong to our contemporary world of atomic power and automation; books of its kind are not written to-day. Its spell, however, thanks to its basis in nature and Hudson's passionate fidelity to his vision, persists with remarkable vitality and freshness. It is beyond doubt, I suppose, that the modern psychologist will view Hudson's Rima with little but grave disquiet, suspicion and possibly even scorn; in her will be seen the fruit of a thousand dark frustrations, bottled inhibitions, fixations, complexes and all the rest. The modern reader may agree. If so he will deny himself the experience of a rare enchantment and possibly, which is much worse, the chance of introducing himself to the supreme nature writer in English literature, a prose writer of incomparable purity owing nothing to trick or fashion, and a rare, tender soul.

H. E. BATES