

W. H. HUDSON

GREEN MANSIONS

Introduction by
N. R. Teitel



Complete
and Unabridged

GREEN MANSIONS



W. H. HUDSON



AIRMONT

AIRMONT PUBLISHING COMPANY, INC.
22 EAST 60TH STREET • NEW YORK 10022

An Airmont Classic

*pecially selected for the Airmont Library
from the immortal literature of the world*

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ISBN: 0-8049-0087-6

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Introduction

William Henry Hudson described himself as a "Dumnonian, if not 'a swart Belarian,' with an admixture of Irish blood." His father, Daniel, was born in Marblehead, Massachusetts, in 1804. His mother, Caroline Augustus Kimble, was a native of Maine. This combination of Yankee and Celtic backgrounds was to produce in their celebrated son a temperament at once passionately alive and curiously reserved. When tuberculosis threatened him, Daniel and his wife exchanged the harsh rigors of New England for the more salutary climate of Argentina. It was here, at Quelmes, near Buenos Aires—in the exotic land of pampas and gauchos—that the author of *Green Mansions* was born on August 4, 1841.

Throughout his long and seemingly uneventful life, this "very tall, loose-framed man" considered himself primarily a naturalist. Birds were his special province. Undoubtedly, his abiding love of nature was first compelled and nourished by the magical land of his birth. And what a land it was! A sea of grass, lagoons, wild cattle, horses, yellow-bellied cuckoos, omnipresent ombú trees—all calculated to fill a sensitive child's heart with curiosity and wonder. His formal education was scanty. But he had eyes to see, and ears to listen. In *Far Away and Long Ago*, Hudson tenderly and nostalgically evokes

the halcyon days of his boyhood—days that indelibly stamped the soul and mind of the man.

At the age of sixteen, sickness struck a sledge-hammer blow; first typhus, then rheumatic fever. For the rest of his life, Hudson suffered periodic bouts of illness. But in spite of illness and a neurasthenic fear of death, he managed to live fully and creatively. He read voraciously, traveled extensively, and wrote voluminously. In 1870, he voyaged to the Rio Negro region of Patagonia. Here, amidst vestiges of prehistoric man, he once again joined in imaginative communion with his ancestral, primitive past. Oneness was all. Time was a mere figment. He was the sum total of all the ages of man.

In 1874, his parents dead, Hudson turned his back forever on his native land. At the age of thirty-four he arrived in his "demi-paradise"—Victorian England. His long and tortuous career as a writer was to begin. For more than a quarter of a century he wrestled Job-like with poverty and neglect. Unfortunately, his marriage to Emily Wingrave—a former concert and opera singer, fifteen years his senior—was not made in heaven. Life was a series of boardinghouses—run by Emily—all failures. In *Afoot in England*, Hudson reveals with infinite pathos their long years of penury together. Richard E. Haymaker, in his notable work on Hudson, *From Pampas to Hedgerows to Downs*, observes: "As late as 1916, he (Hudson) was without sufficient funds to send his wife to an invalid home."

The Purple Land (1885), Hudson's first novel, published at the age of forty-four, brought him little attention. *Argentine Ornithology* (1889) won him recognition as a specialist, but very little money. *The Naturalist in La Plata* and *Idle Days in Patagonia* (1892-1893) suffered a similar fate. However, his reputation among leading literary figures began to grow. Such diverse writers as Ford Madox Ford, George Gissing, John Galsworthy, Stephen Crane, Joseph Conrad, Henry James, Arnold Bennett, Norman Douglas—all fulsomely acknowledged his extraordinary gifts. At long last, in 1901, through the intercession of Lord Grey, Balfour awarded him a pension of 150 pounds. It is characteristic of the man that he gave

up this money when *Green Mansions* eventually became a financial success.

Money did not alter Hudson's mode of life. Simple, unaffected, basically a solitary, he continued his sensuous exploration of an earthly paradise denied to most of us. He left us his vision and his hope. He died in his eighty-first year, and is buried at Broadwater Cemetery at Worthing.

Green Mansions is first and foremost the work of an impassioned imagination. There have been other books replete with exotic settings, adventure, and romance. But no other book, play, or poem breathes the unique atmosphere and intensity of Hudson's sensuous masterpiece. To find some parallel we must look to *Wuthering Heights*, or back to the more fevered Elizabethans. Parallels, however, even at best, are merely half-truths. Heathcliff may be blood brother to Abel, but in what real or fictional world will we find a sister to Rima? She stands alone—all things to all men: a dream, a wish, a nature goddess, a singular elfish hummingbird, a disembodied passion—she is Rima: larger than life, and more real than truth.

The novel begins slowly. We are introduced to Abel Guevez de Argensola—poet, naturalist, and political exile from Venezuela. We are informed of his flight, illness, futile search for gold, and final arrival at a village inhabited by eighteen savages. They include Runi, chief of the tribe of hunters; young, impetuous Kua-kó; and old Cla-cla. Imperceptibly, Abel becomes an integral part of this strange ménage. Of even greater significance is his own metamorphosis. His lust for gold dies. He surrenders himself completely to the intoxicating lure of Nature. One fated day, Abel wanders alone into a nearby forest. The drama begins . . .

“—A low strain of exquisite bird melody, wonderfully pure and expressive, unlike any musical sound I had heard before.” Abel listens, completely enthralled and baffled. For the bird-notes sound mysteriously human. They beckon and entice him. But no human presence is revealed. Abel—contrary to the entreaties of his superstitious companions—returns again and again to the enchanted forest. The voice becomes a haunting reality as

Abel's quest for its source becomes obsessive. Finally, the source is discovered: "—A girl form, reclining on the moss among the ferns and herbage, near the roots of a small tree." She stares at him for a long moment, then literally melts away into the verdure. At their second meeting, a serpent—serpents are always present in Gardens of Eden—bites an enraptured Abel just above the ankle. Terrified, he flees—then becomes hopelessly lost. He leaps from a bank, and sinks into unconsciousness.

A melodramatic beginning. Hardly credible, perhaps—But Hudson's ineffable magic has long since forced us to abandon any rational judgment. We believe because we must believe. The spell has been woven. We are willing captives.

The scene shifts to a hut where Abel regains consciousness. From old Nulfo, he learns of his rescue by the shy, listless girl now seated in shadow. The girl is Rima: a tangible apparition who speaks to him in Spanish. Abel attempts to discover the origin of her strange, musical language. But to no avail. Old Nulfo remains evasive and enigmatic. The mystery deepens. But all clouds are dispelled in the magical woods as Abel and Rima are drawn irresistibly together. The dichotomy in Rima's nature becomes obvious. In Nulfo's hut, she is a crippled bird; outside—in her own domain of sky and tree—she flies free. Always, however, she is essentially human and wondrously female in her elusiveness.

Abel, determined to learn Rima's background, tracks down Nulfo in his secret lair. The old hypocrite is eating meat, a heinous crime in Rima's eyes. Abel joins him, but again is unable to ferret out the truth. Disconsolately, he wanders away. Meeting Rima, he is plunged into even greater despondency by her rueful silence. He returns to the village, lies to old Cla-cla about his absence, then—unable to tolerate any separation from his beloved—rushes back to the forest and gets lost again. He is rescued by the ubiquitous Rima. The following day they both ascend the mountain Ytaioa. It is here that the mystery begins to unravel. For Abel, while describing the topography of the vast, impenetrable world that lies beyond Rima's forest, inadvertently mentions the mountains of Riolama. Riolama—The word is a bell galvanizing Rima into

action. They *must* journey there! It is the land where her mother was found, the land of her people, the land of her birth. No argument can dissuade her. They must start at once!

The hazardous journey to Riolama takes eighteen days. On the way, two significant events occur. The little group of Nulfo, Rima, and Abel are met by travelers; and Abel finally learns the strange circumstances of Rima's birth. Old Nulfo is not her grandfather, but is, in fact, a reformed criminal who had rescued Rima's mother. To Nulfo, this strange, beautiful woman was a saint. When she dies, Nulfo takes her child—Rima—into the forest by Ytaioa. Rima grows up. She loathes the neighboring Indians because they are at constant war with her beloved animals. They, in turn, fear and dread her, thinking her possessed of supernatural powers. As long as she remains in her forest, they will not touch her.

Riolama is finally reached. The cave where Rima's mother first appeared is explored. But nowhere is there a sign of human habitation. An anguished Rima is made to realize that her mother was the last of a vanished race, and that her mysterious speech will never be understood by another. Her pain is assuaged by Abel. For the first time they openly declare their love. Rima departs for her forest again. Abel and Nulfo must follow later. She must have time—time to welcome her lover clothed in a dress white as the mountaintops. For it was thus that her mother had first appeared, dazzling the eyes of Nulfo.

Abel and Nulfo return to the forest. But Rima is not to be seen or heard. The hut has been burned to the ground. The Indians, having learned from the travelers of Rima's departure, have invaded the forest. The events leading up to her death and cremation are described by Kua-kó. From now on, Abel—utterly bereft—lives only for revenge. He kills Kua-kó, succeeds in his plot to exterminate Runi and all his tribe, then flees back to the now sacred forest. Nulfo is dead. Days of madness and hallucination follow. He wanders alone with his grief. Finally, he collects Rima's ashes in a richly ornamented urn that he has laboriously wrought. On the back of the urn winds a sculptured serpent. And on the serpent is indelibly inscribed the tragic legend: *Sin vos y sin dios y mi—*

Days, months later, "a young stranger, penniless, in rags, wasted almost to a skeleton" walks the streets of Georgetown, British Guiana. Hudson leaves Abel here—a man eternally haunted by memory.

Green Mansions is both symbol and allegory. But it is symbol and allegory made tangible by a simple, effortless style. The writing is dew-fresh, minted of childlike wonder and rapture. Its throbbing sincerity rips the blinders from our eyes and makes us one again with a world from which we have wilfully exiled ourselves. Hudson's art is a highly conscious one. But it is an art that conceals art—an art that is as inevitable as it is simple. There is a sturdy realism here, a realism that fleshes the magic and gives bone and structure to the most rapturous fancy. Homely details bind the sinews together. Always, when we are on the point of falling from an exalted, romantic precipice, we are brought back sharply by a mundane occurrence. Hudson desires to make his vision *our* vision. Like Thoreau, he is teacher as well as artist. And his exotic romance is calculated to instruct as well as to enthrall.

Hudson is a naturalist. But a most unique one. Unlike Darwin, he is not concerned with hammering out a theory, or building a philosophical edifice. He is primarily a poet who happens to be a naturalist. His mission is to make Nature—in all its myriad forms—an integral and sustaining part of our lives. His reverence for all living things is akin to Schweitzer's. Nature is a bountiful feast of which we must partake in order to survive. Urbanized, mechanized, choked by brick and mortar, we are blind to the healing and sustaining life force that exists in a patch of sky or wind-blown leaf. We have become distinct and separate, existing on the periphery of life rather than living deep within its core. Hudson leads us back—back to the Garden of Eden that lives and breaths eternally around us. He revivifies our senses and exalts the meaning of life. "Trailing clouds of glory do we come," lamented Wordsworth. The glory remains, insists Hudson, if we do not blind our eyes and shut our hearts.

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Prologue

It is a cause of very great regret to me that this task has taken so much longer a time than I had expected for its completion. It is now many months—over a year, in fact—since I wrote to Georgetown announcing my intention of publishing, *in a very few months*, the whole truth about Mr. Abel. Hardly less could have been looked for from his nearest friend, and I had hoped that the discussion in the newspapers would have ceased, at all events, until the appearance of the promised book. It has not been so; and at this distance from Guiana I was not aware of how much conjectural matter was being printed week by week in the local press, some of which must have been painful reading to Mr. Abel's friends. A darkened chamber, the existence of which had never been suspected in that familiar house in Main Street, furnished only with an ebony stand on which stood a cinerary urn, its surface ornamented with flower and leaf and thorn, and winding through it all the figure of a serpent; an inscription, too, of seven short words which no one could understand or rightly interpret; and finally, the disposal of the mysterious ashes—that was all there was relating to an untold chapter in a man's life for imagination to work on. Let us hope that now, at last, the romance-weaving will come to an end. It was, however, but natural that the keenest curiosity should have been excited; not only because of that peculiar and indescribable charm of the man, which all recognized and which won all hearts, but also because of that hidden chapter—that sojourn in the desert, about which he preserved silence. It was felt in a vague way by his intimates that he had met with unusual experiences which had profoundly affected him and changed the course of his life. To me alone was the truth known, and I must now tell, briefly as possible, how my great friendship and close intimacy with him came about.

When, in 1887, I arrived in Georgetown to take up an appointment in a public office, I found Mr. Abel an old

resident there, a man of means and a favorite in society. Yet he was an alien, a Venezuelan, one of that turbulent people on our border whom the colonists have always looked on as their natural enemies. The story told to me was that about twelve years before that time he had arrived at Georgetown from some remote district in the interior; that he had journeyed alone on foot across half the continent to the coast, and had first appeared among them, a young stranger, penniless, in rags, wasted almost to a skeleton by fever and misery of all kinds, his face blackened by long exposure to sun and wind. Friendless, with but little English, it was a hard struggle for him to live; but he managed somehow, and eventually letters from Caracas informed him that a considerable property of which he had been deprived was once more his own, and he was also invited to return to his country to take his part in the government of the republic. But Mr. Abel, though young, had already outlived political passions and aspirations, and, apparently, even the love of his country; at all events, he elected to stay where he was—his enemies, he would say smilingly, were his best friends—and one of the first uses he made of his fortune was to buy that house in Main Street which was afterwards like a home to me.

I must state here that my friend's full name was Abel Guevez de Argensola, but in his early days in Georgetown he was called by his Christian name only, and later he wished to be known simply as "Mr. Abel."

I had no sooner made his acquaintance than I ceased to wonder at the esteem and even affection with which he, a Venezuelan, was regarded in this British colony. All knew and liked him, and the reason of it was the personal charm of the man, his kindly disposition, his manner with women, which pleased them and excited no man's jealousy—not even the old hot-tempered planter's, with a very young and pretty and light headed wife—his love of little children, of all wild creatures, of nature, and of whatsoever was furthest removed from the common material interests and concerns of a purely commercial community. The things which excited other men—politics, sport, and the price of crystals—were outside of his

thoughts, and when men had done with them for a season, when like the tempest they had "blown their fill" in office and clubroom and house and wanted a change, it was a relief to turn to Mr. Abel and get him to discourse of *his* world—the world of nature and of the spirit.

It was, all felt, a good thing to have a Mr. Abel in Georgetown. That it was indeed good for me I quickly discovered. I had certainly not expected to meet in such a place with any person to share my tastes—that love of poetry which has been the chief passion and delight of my life; but such a one I had found in Mr. Abel. It surprised me that he, suckled on the literature of Spain, and a reader of only ten or twelve years of English literature, possessed a knowledge of our modern poetry as intimate as my own, and a love of it equally great. This feeling brought us together, and made us two—the nervous olive-skinned Hispano-American of the tropics and the phlegmatic blue-eyed Saxon of the cold north—one in spirit and more than brothers. Many were the daylight hours we spent together and "tired the sun with talking"; many, past counting, the precious evenings in that restful house of his where I was an almost daily guest. I had not looked for such happiness; nor, he often said, had he. A result of this intimacy was that the vague idea concerning his hidden past, that some unusual experience had profoundly affected him and perhaps changed the whole course of his life, did not diminish, but, on the contrary, became accentuated, and was often in my mind. The change in him was almost painful to witness whenever our wandering talk touched on the subject of the aborigines, and of the knowledge he had acquired of their character and languages when living or traveling among them; all that made his conversation most engaging—the lively, curious mind, the wit, the gaiety of spirit tinged with a tender melancholy—appeared to fade out of it; even the expression of his face would change, becoming hard and set, and he would deal you out facts in a dry mechanical way as if reading them in a book. It grieved me to note this, but I dropped no hint of such a feeling, and would never have spoken about it but for a quarrel which came at last to make the one brief solitary break in that close

friendship of years. I got into a bad state of health, and Abel was not only much concerned about it, but annoyed, as if I had not treated him well by being ill, and he would even say that I could get well if I wished to. I did not take this seriously, but one morning, when calling to see me at the office, he attacked me in a way that made me downright angry with him. He told me that indolence and the use of stimulants was the cause of my bad health. He spoke in a mocking way, with a pretense of not quite meaning it, but the feeling could not be wholly disguised. Stung by his reproaches, I blurted out that he had no right to talk to me, even in fun, in such a way. Yes, he said, getting serious, he had the best right—that of our friendship. He would be no true friend if he kept his peace about such a matter. Then, in my haste, I retorted that to me the friendship between us did not seem so perfect and complete as it did to him. One condition of friendship is that the partners in it should be known to each other. He had had my whole life and mind open to him, to read it as a book. *His* life was a closed and clasped volume to me.

His face darkened, and after a few moments' silent reflection he got up and left me with a cold goodbye, and without that hand-grasp which had been customary between us.

After his departure I had the feeling that a great loss, a great calamity, had befallen me, but I was still smarting at his too candid criticism, all the more because in my heart I acknowledged its truth. And that night, lying awake, I repented of the cruel retort I had made, and resolved to ask his forgiveness and leave it to him to determine the question of our future relations. But he was beforehand with me, and with the morning came a letter begging my forgiveness and asking me to go that evening to dine with him.

We were alone, and during dinner and afterwards, when we sat smoking and sipping black coffee in the veranda, we were unusually quiet, even to gravity, which caused the two white-clad servants that waited on us—the brown-faced subtle-eyed old Hindoo butler and an almost blue-black young Guiana negro—to direct many furtive glances at their master's face. They were accustomed to see him

in a more genial mood when he had a friend to dine. To me the change in his manner was not surprising; from the moment of seeing him I had divined that he had determined to open the shut and clasped volume of which I had spoken—that the time had now come for him to speak.

