THE PURPLE LAND

BY W. H. HUDSON

INTRODUCTION BY

WILLIAM McFEE

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PREFACE TO THE NEW EDITION

THIS work was first issued in 1885, by Messrs. Sampson Low, in two slim volumes, with the longer and, to most persons, enigmatical title of *The Purple Land that England Lost.* A purple land may be found in almost any region of the globe, and 'tis of our gains, not our losses, we keep count. A few notices of the book appeared in the papers, one or two of the more serious literary journals reviewing it (not favourably) under the heading of "Travels and Geography"; but the reading public cared not to buy, and it very shortly fell into oblivion. There it might have remained for a further period of nineteen years, or for ever, since the sleep of a book is apt to be of the unawakening kind, had not certain men of letters, who found it on a forgotten heap and liked it in spite of its faults, or because of them, concerned themselves to revive it.

We are often told that an author never wholly loses his affection for a first book, and the feeling has been likened (more than once) to that of a parent towards a first-born. *I* have not said it,

but in consenting to this reprint I considered that a writer's early or unregarded work is apt to be raked up when he is not standing by to make remarks. He may be absent on a journey from which he is not expected to return. It accordingly seemed better that I should myself supervise a new edition, since this would enable me to remove a few of the numerous spots and pimples which decorate the ingenuous countenance of the work before handing it on to posterity.

Besides many small verbal corrections and changes, the deletion of some paragraphs and the insertion of a few new ones, I have omitted one entire chapter containing the Story of a Piebald Horse, recently reprinted in another book entitled *El Ombu*. I have also dropped the tedious introduction to the former edition, only preserving, as an appendix, the historical part, for the sake of such of my readers as may like to have a few facts about the land that England lost.

W. H. H.

September, 1904.

INTRODUCTION TO "THE PURPLE LAND"

The vicissitudes of authorship are admirably revealed in the history of Hudson's novel of the *Banda Oriental* since its publication, forty-two years ago, under the title *The Purple Land that England Lost.* It had apparently died, and was buried deep among other forgotten books of the eighties. Nineteen years later it experienced a resurrection. It came out again, with the title shortened to its present form, and since that day its vogue has gradually spread among the lovers of books. In 1916 it was published in America, and in the course of the next ten years eight printings were required to cope with the growing interest in this remarkable series of *Reisebilder.* Now no apology is expected for its inclusion in the Modern Library. It is known to all men by name, it is a peculiar favorite among those members of the reading public who enjoy a narrative which is not constructed upon the fashionable contemporary model.

In an introduction to a book, which has grown like seed buried in a tomb, by reason of its own vitality, out of oblivion into a secure position in

modern literature, it would be impertinent and cheap to indulge in the excited phraseology which has been pilfered from our flamboyant essayists by the writers of "jacket blurbs." *The Purple Land* needs no purple language. It is described from time to time as "a novel." If there is any meaning at all left in that word, Hudson's book is not a novel. It has been called "a romance," and here again one addicted to romances might easily feel cheated after reading it. It is as much of a novel, as much of a romance, as Mr. Belloc's classic *The Path to Rome,* as De Quincy's *Opium Eater* or Mr. O'Brien's *White Shadows in the South Seas.* That is to say, it is a misnomer to include it among those novels and romances which are accepted as such by the general public. Honesty is imperative in dealing with the works of a man like Hudson, and very little imagination is needed to evoke the distaste he himself would have manifested if he had heard anybody trying to pass off one of his books for something it did not happen to be.

The Purple Land indeed, appears to me a very successful example of the kind of book which eventually succeeds for the very reason that it is not a novel or even "a romance." Hudson's equipment did not include a mastery of what we call novel-technique. He was, I maintain against all comers, primarily a naturalist with bohemian habits, a queer, lovable fellow. Such a man cherishes a philosophy which makes it difficult for

him to move easily within the somewhat artificial limitations of conventional fiction. To expect Hudson to conform to the usages of a modern story magazine, for example, would be like fitting an Argentine *vaquero* with a suit of hunting pink from a Bond Street tailor. It might be a consummate fit, but the moment he began to exercise his body according to his custom on the pampas the coat would split down the back. So with Hudson as a novelist. The conventional form never fitted his mind. To tell the truth briefly, there was a quality of simplicity in Hudson's mind which made the sophisticated novel-form seem grotesque and unreal to him. And it is that same simplicity of spirit which attracts men and women to a book like *The Purple Land*. It is responsible, moreover, for the deceptive simplicity of his style, because unless you have a spirit like his, a spirit happier among birds in the forest than among men in the city, you will never achieve a style like his. Joseph Conrad said, in an oft-quoted passage, "You can't tell how this fellow gets his effects. He writes as the grass grows; the good God makes it there, and that is all there is to it." The above suggestion may help us to a guess, that it was because he was not overly occupied with "getting an effect," that Hudson's prose steals upon us like a change in the evening sky, or on the surface of the sea at sunrise. This marvelously "natural" ease of execution delights both professional novelists like Conrad, Galsworthy and Ford Madox

Ford, all of whom knew and loved Hudson as a personal friend, and the average reader. The latter, a much-maligned person given to surprising his traducers, reveals at times a decided preference for a rambling narrative not overburdened with an artificial plot. He enjoys a traveler's tale, and the remoteness of Hudson's *Purple Land* is no obstacle to his interest when it is seen through that serene crystalline style, which like the clear air of tropical regions makes distant objects seem miraculously close at hand.

It is unexpectedly embarrassing to discuss this book as a piece of fiction, which of course it is, after denying it a place among formal novels and romances. But a certain amount of criticism is allowed even to writers of introductions, and no ultimate advantage accrues to Hudson by claiming for *The Purple Land* the thrilling appeal of the modern cowboy book. For myself, the fable of the book was never indispensable. The young Englishman whose amorous adventures precipitated his flight from Buenos Aires to Montevideo across those "unlovely red billows" of the La Plata River, is not entirely successful in disentangling his personality from Hudson's own, and it is for this reason the story falls into the class of travel-narratives, or if you prefer it, travel-pictures, like Heine's, or Sterne's *Sentimental Journey*. And this is the more true because, as Mr. Galsworthy points out, Hudson depicts not only what he saw but the emotion behind the observation—"the

spirit of his vision." He never ceases to be a fine type of the adventurous young Englishman; and let the reader who is interested in character-drawing note how sharply the young man's racial traits stand out at the very moment when he is among men of his own race. The colony of drunken and shiftless scions of "old families" exiled for the good of their country to the *Banda Oriental,* is remarkably well done in *The Purple Land.* It is a peculiar commentary upon history that great leaders have usually emerged out of such groups of nonentities to influence the destinies of unborn millions. The whole point of Hudson's original title, *The Purple Land that England Lost,* is that no such leader appeared on this occasion. It is strange to read Hudson's very emotional regrets—he who was the least jingoistic of men, who had such scant sympathy for the inevitable changes which afflict a region when his countrymen embark upon their schemes of imperial development. It might be said with truth that here Hudson was inconsistent because in general his opinion of birds and savages was higher than his opinion of civilized humanity. He seems to have had something of the elusiveness of a gentle wild creature in himself. And whatever justice there may be in the dislike of the English people for Mr. Epstein's strange sculpture of the Hudson Memorial in a London park, that sculpture, if it means anything at all, is a bold attempt to express in stone the strangeness of

Hudson's lovable personality. In Ford Madox Ford's book on Conrad there is an unforgetable allusion to a visit Hudson paid to Conrad's Kentish home. At first it was believed to be the bailiff, then a man come to discuss the sale of a horse, when "an extremely tall man, with a disproportionately small head," went "stalking past the window." It was Hudson, come to visit the Polish seaman who had written "Almayer's Folly." In some ways those two men were far apart. Yet significant traits they had in common. They were both original literary artists. Both were so little rewarded by the public that Civil List pensions stood between them and penury. To both the spectacle of civilized man, against the background of tropical vegetation and the stupendous grandeur of the untamed earth and sea, evoked ironic sentiments. And both, in large measure, stand out from their own generation on account of their success in giving us authentic interpretations of alien psychologies. The author of *The Purple Land* would know how to estimate the author of *Nostromo*. They were both romantic realists, creating out of their own experiences a world of bright glamor, shot through with a lofty skepticism of man's ultimate destiny. Neither of them ever successfully achieved the modern rapid fire method of telling a story. They speak to us from an age which is nowadays being subjected to much cynical analysis. But it is one of the most astonishing characteristics of the Vic-

torian Era that the great men of that era are so often great men still, especially those of them who did not make much money.

The present age of literature will be known, no doubt, for its satirical curiosity. We are going about equipped with text-books of psycho-analysis, discovering, to our own satisfaction, that the men and women of all ages, who achieved anything in the way of fame, suffered from various mental lesions to which we give learned names. It must be confessed, by one who remembers the vogue of Max Nordau's *Degeneration*, in which most of the great Victorians were catalogued as psychopathic specimens, that the popular fashion in biography is no more than the child of modern fiction, sired by modern publishing and born in a hospital. It is a literary expression of the age of jazz. It will pass, if it be not already passing. But behind the tumult of those who surge to and fro in the market place, seeking some new thing, worshipping unknown gods, dwells another public, less sophisticated and less certain that we are at the apex of human culture.

This public *The Purple Land* has pleased and will continue to please. To most of us today this romantic narrative of life fifty years ago in the *Banda Oriental* seems as fanciful as Gulliver's Travels or Marco Polo's account of the Great Khan. The *Banda Oriental* itself has vanished and has become the model republic of Uruguay, the virtuous child of the South America family.

Roads and railways cut through the vast savannahs over which Hudson's youthful hero rode in company with heroes, ne'er do weels, rogues, vagabonds and patriots. The incredibly innocent and romantic young ladies whom he met have borne daughters, who visit Paris and New York and take back with them shingled heads, golf-sticks and police-dogs. Uruguayans may still proclaim themselves Reds or Whites, Colorados or Blancos, just as we are labelled Republicans or Democrats. But the golden age of which Hudson wrote is gone like the Creole days of Cable's *Grandissimes* or the maritime era of New England. It is gone, yet it is preserved forever in the crystal clarity of these pages, the legacy of one of the great spirits of his age.

WILLIAM MCFEE

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THE PURPLE LAND

CHAPTER I

RAMBLES IN MODERN TROY

THREE chapters in the story of my life—three periods, distinct and well defined, yet consecutive—beginning when I had not completed twenty-five years and finishing before thirty, will probably prove the most eventful of all. To the very end they will come back oftenest to memory and seem more vivid than all the other years of existence—the four-and-twenty I had already lived, and the, say, forty or forty-five—I hope it may be fifty or even sixty—which are to follow. For what soul in this wonderful various world would wish to depart before ninety! The dark as well as the light, its sweet and its bitter, make me love it.

Of the first of these three a word only need be written. This was the period of courtship and matrimony; and though the experience seemed to me then something altogether new and strange in the world, it must nevertheless have resembled that of other men, since all men marry. And the last period, which was the longest of the three, occupying fully three years, could not be told. It was all black disaster. Three years of enforced

separation and the extremest suffering which the cruel law of the land allowed an enraged father to inflict on his child and the man who had ventured to wed her against his will. Even the wise may be driven mad by oppression, and I that was never wise, but lived in and was led by the passions and illusions and the unbounded self-confidence of youth, what it must have been for me when we were cruelly torn asunder; when I was cast into prison to lie for long months in the company of felons, ever thinking of her who was also desolate and breaking her heart! But it is ended —the abhorred restraint, the anxiety, the brooding over a thousand possible and impossible schemes of revenge. If it is any consolation to know that in breaking her heart he, at the same time, broke his own and made haste to join her in that silent place, I have it. Ah no! it is no comfort to me, since I cannot but reflect that before he shattered my life I had shattered his by taking her from him, who was his idol. We are quits then, and I can even say, "Peace to his ashes!" But I could not say it then in my frenzy and grief, nor could it be said in that fatal country which I had inhabited from boyhood and had learned to love like my own, and had hoped never to leave. It was grown hateful to me, and, flying from it, I found myself once more in that Purple Land where we had formerly taken refuge together, and which now seemed to my distracted mind a place of pleasant and peaceful memories.

During the months of quietude after the storm, mostly spent in lonely rambles by the shore, these memories were more and more with me. Sometimes sitting on the summit of that great solitary hill, which gives the town its name, I would gaze by the hour on the wide prospect towards the interior, as if I could see and never weary of seeing all that lay beyond—plains and rivers and woods and hills and cabins where I had rested, and many a kindly human face. Even the faces of those who had ill-treated or regarded me with evil eyes now appeared to have a friendly look. Most of all did I think of that dear river, the unforgettable Yí, the shaded white house at the end of the little town, and the sad and beautiful image of one whom I, alas! had made unhappy.

So much was I occupied towards the end of that vacant period with these recollections that I remembered how, before quitting these shores, the thought had come to me that during some quiet interval in my life I would go over it all again, and write the history of my rambles for others to read in the future. But I did not attempt it then, nor until long years afterwards. For I had no sooner begun to play with the idea than something came to rouse me from the state I was in, during which I had been like one that has outlived his activities, and is no longer capable of a new emotion, but feeds wholly on the past. And this something new, affecting me so that I was all at once myself again, eager to be up and doing, was

nothing more than a casual word from a distance, the cry of a lonely heart, which came by chance to my ear; and hearing it I was like one who opening his eyes from a troubled doze unexpectedly sees the morning star in its unearthly lustre above the wide, dark plain where night overtook him—the star of day and everlasting hope, and of passion and strife and toil and rest and happiness.

I need not linger on the events which took us to the Banda—our nocturnal flight from Paquíta's summer home on the pampas; the hiding and clandestine marriage in the capital and subsequent escape northwards into the province of Santa Fé; the seven to eight months of somewhat troubled happiness we had there; and finally, the secret return to Buenos Ayres in search of a ship to take us out of the country. Troubled happiness! Ah yes, and my greatest trouble was when I looked on her, my partner for life, when she seemed loveliest, so small, so exquisite in her dark blue eyes that were like violets, and silky black hair and tender pink and olive complexion—so frail in appearance! And I had taken her—stolen her—from her natural protectors, from the home where she had been worshipped—I of an alien race and another religion, without means, and, because I had stolen her, an offender against the law. But of this no more. I begin my itinerary where, safe on our little ship, with the towers of Buenos Ayres fast fading away in the west, we began to feel free from apprehension and to give ourselves