

**Green Mansions:  
A Romance of the Tropical Forest**

**by**

**W. H. Hudson**

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## Foreword

I take up pen for this foreword with the fear of one who knows that he cannot do justice to his subject, and the trembling of one who would not, for a good deal, set down words displeasing to the eye of him who wrote *Green Mansions*, *The Purple Land*, and all those other books which have meant so much to me. For of all living authors--now that Tolstoi has gone I could least dispense with W. H. Hudson. Why do I love his writing so? I think because he is, of living writers that I read, the rarest spirit, and has the clearest gift of conveying to me the nature of that spirit. Writers are to their readers little new worlds to be explored; and each traveller in the realms of literature must needs have a favourite hunting-ground, which, in his good will--or perhaps merely in his egoism--he would wish others to share with him.

The great and abiding misfortunes of most of us writers are twofold: We are, as worlds, rather common tramping-ground for our readers, rather tame territory; and as guides and dragomans thereto we are too superficial, lacking clear intimacy of expression; in fact--like guide or dragoman--we cannot let folk into the real secrets, or show them the spirit, of the land.

Now, Hudson, whether in a pure romance like this *Green Mansions*, or in that romantic piece of realism *The Purple Land*, or in books like *Idle Days in Patagonia*, *Afoot in England*, *The Land's End*, *Adventures among Birds*, *A Shepherd's Life*, and all his other nomadic records of communings with men, birds, beasts, and Nature, has a supreme gift of disclosing not only the thing he sees but the spirit of his vision. Without apparent effort he takes you with him into a rare, free, natural world, and always you are refreshed, stimulated, enlarged, by going there.

He is of course a distinguished naturalist, probably the most acute, broad-minded, and understanding observer of Nature living. And this, in an age of specialism, which loves to put men into pigeonholes and label them, has been a misfortune to the reading public, who seeing the label *Naturalist*, pass on, and take down the nearest novel. Hudson has indeed the gifts and knowledge of a *Naturalist*, but that is a mere fraction of his value and interest. A really great writer such as this is no more to be circumscribed by a single word than *America* by the part of it called *New York*. The expert knowledge which Hudson has of Nature gives to all his work backbone and surety of fibre, and to his sense of beauty an intimate actuality. But his real eminence and extraordinary attraction lie in his spirit and philosophy. We feel from his writings that he is nearer to Nature than other men, and yet more truly civilized. The competitive, towny culture, the queer up-to-date commercial knowingness with which we are so busy coating ourselves simply will not stick to him. A passage in his *Hampshire Days* describes him better than I can: "The blue sky, the brown soil beneath, the grass, the trees, the animals, the wind, and rain, and 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 my passions are one. I feel the 'strangeness' only with regard to my fellow men, especially in towns, where they exist in conditions unnatural to me, but

congenial to them.... In such moments we sometimes feel a kinship with, and are strangely drawn to, the dead, who were not as these; the long, long dead, the men who knew not life in towns, and felt no strangeness in sun and wind and rain." This unspoiled unity with Nature pervades all his writings; they are remote from the fret and dust and pettiness of town life; they are large, direct, free. It is not quite simplicity, for the mind of this writer is subtle and fastidious, sensitive to each motion of natural and human life; but his sensitiveness is somehow different from, almost inimical to, that of us others, who sit indoors and dip our pens in shades of feeling. Hudson's fancy is akin to the flight of the birds that are his special loves--it never seems to have entered a house, but since birth to have been roaming the air, in rain and sun, or visiting the trees and the grass. I not only disbelieve utterly, but intensely dislike, the doctrine of metempsychosis, which, if I understand it aright, seems the negation of the creative impulse, an apotheosis of staleness--nothing quite new in the world, never anything quite new--not even the soul of a baby; and so I am not prepared to entertain the whim that a bird was one of his remote incarnations; still, in sweep of wing, quickness of eye, and natural sweet strength of song he is not unlike a super-bird--which is a horrid image. And that reminds me: This, after all, is a foreword to *Green Mansions*--the romance of the bird-girl Rima--a story actual yet fantastic, which immortalizes, I think, as passionate a love of all beautiful things as ever was in the heart of man. Somewhere Hudson says: "The sense of the beautiful is God's best gift to the human soul." So it is: and to pass that gift on to others, in such measure as herein is expressed, must surely have been happiness to him who wrote *Green Mansions*. In form and spirit the book is unique, a simple romantic narrative transmuted by sheer glow of beauty into a prose poem. Without ever departing from its quality of a tale, it symbolizes the yearning of the human soul for the attainment of perfect love and beauty in this life--that impossible perfection which we must all learn to see fall from its high tree and be consumed in the flames, as was Rima the bird-girl, but whose fine white ashes we gather that they may be mingled at last with our own, when we too have been refined by the fire of death's resignation. The book is soaked through and through with a strange beauty. I will not go on singing its praises, or trying to make it understood, because I have other words to say of its author.

Do we realize how far our town life and culture have got away from things that really matter; how instead of making civilization our handmaid to freedom we have set her heel on our necks, and under it bite dust all the time? Hudson, whether he knows it or not, is now the chief standard-bearer of another faith. Thus he spake in *The Purple Land*: "Ah, yes, we are all vainly seeking after happiness in the wrong way. It was with us once and ours, but we despised it, for it was only the old common happiness which Nature gives to all her children, and we went away from it in search of another grander kind of happiness which some dreamer--Bacon or another--assured us we should find. We had only to conquer Nature, find out her secrets, make her our obedient slave, then the Earth would be Eden, and every man Adam and every woman Eve. We are still marching bravely on, conquering Nature, but how weary and sad we are getting! The old joy in life and gaiety of heart have vanished, though we do sometimes pause for

a few moments in our long forced march to watch the labours of some pale mechanic, seeking after perpetual motion, and indulge in a little, dry, cackling laugh at his expense." And again: "For here the religion that languishes in crowded cities or steals shamefaced to hide itself in dim churches flourishes greatly, filling the soul with a solemn joy. Face to face with Nature on the vast hills at eventide, who does not feel himself near to the Unseen?"

"Out of his heart God shall not pass

His image stamped is on every grass."

All Hudson's books breathe this spirit of revolt against our new enslavement by towns and machinery, and are true oases in an age so dreadfully resigned to the "pale mechanic."

But Hudson is not, as Tolstoi was, a conscious prophet; his spirit is freer, more willful, whimsical--almost perverse--and far more steeped in love of beauty. If you called him a prophet he would stamp his foot at you--as he will at me if he reads these words; but his voice is prophetic, for all that, crying in a wilderness, out of which, at the call, will spring up roses here and there, and the sweet-smelling grass. I would that every man, woman, and child in England were made to read him; and I would that you in America would take him to heart. He is a tonic, a deep refreshing drink, with a strange and wonderful flavour; he is a mine of new interests, and ways of thought instinctively right. As a simple narrator he is well-nigh unsurpassed; as a stylist he has few, if any, living equals. And in all his work there is an indefinable freedom from any thought of after-benefit--even from the desire that we should read him. He puts down what he sees and feels, out of sheer love of the thing seen, and the emotion felt; the smell of the lamp has not touched a single page that he ever wrote. That alone is a marvel to us who know that to write well, even to write clearly, is a wondrous business, long to learn, hard to learn, and no gift of the angels. Style should not obtrude between a writer and his reader; it should be servant, not master. To use words so true and simple that they oppose no obstacle to the flow of thought and feeling from mind to mind, and yet by juxtaposition of word-sounds set up in the recipient continuing emotion or gratification--this is the essence of style; and Hudson's writing has pre-eminently this double quality. From almost any page of his books an example might be taken. Here is one no better than a thousand others, a description of two little girls on a beach: "They were dressed in black frocks and scarlet blouses, which set off their beautiful small dark faces; their eyes sparkled like black diamonds, and their loose hair was a wonder to see, a black mist or cloud about their heads and necks composed of threads fine as gossamer, blacker than jet and shining like spun glass--hair that looked as if no comb or brush could ever tame its beautiful wildness. And in spirit they were what they seemed: such a wild, joyous, frolicsome spirit, with such grace and fleetness, one does not look for in human beings, but only in birds or in some small bird-like volatile mammal--a squirrel or a spider-monkey of the tropical forest, or the chinchilla of the desolate mountain slopes; the swiftest, wildest, loveliest, most airy, and most vocal of small beauties." Or this, as the quintessence of a sly remark: "After that Mantel got on to his horse and rode away. It was black and rainy, but he had never needed moon or lantern to find what he sought by night, whether his own

house, or a fat cow--also his own, perhaps." So one might go on quoting felicity for ever from this writer. He seems to touch every string with fresh and uninked fingers; and the secret of his power lies, I suspect, in the fact that his words: "Life being more than all else to me . . ." are so utterly true.

I do not descant on his love for simple folk and simple things, his championship of the weak, and the revolt against the cagings and cruelties of life, whether to men or birds or beasts, that springs out of him as if against his will; because, having spoken of him as one with a vital philosophy or faith, I don't wish to draw red herrings across the main trail of his worth to the world. His work is a vision of natural beauty and of human life as it might be, quickened and sweetened by the sun and the wind and the rain, and by fellowship with all the other forms of life--the truest vision now being given to us, who are more in want of it than any generation has ever been. A very great writer; and--to my thinking--the most valuable our age possesses.

JOHN GALSWORTHY

September 1915 Manaton: Devon

## 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 favourite 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 club-room 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 travelling 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 presence 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 in 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 good-bye, 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 Hindu 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.

## Chapter I

Now that we are cool, he said, and regret that we hurt each other, I am not sorry that it happened. I deserved your reproach: a hundred times I have wished to tell you the whole story of my travels and adventures among the savages, and one of the reasons which prevented me was the fear that it would have an unfortunate effect on our friendship. That was precious, and I desired above everything to keep it. But I must think no more about that now. I must think only of how I am to tell you my story. I will begin at a time when I was twenty-three. It was early in life to be in the thick of politics, and in trouble to the extent of having to fly my country to save my liberty, perhaps my life.

Every nation, someone remarks, has the government it deserves, and Venezuela certainly has the one it deserves and that suits it best. We call it a republic, not only because it is not one, but also because a thing must have a name; and to have a good name, or a fine name, is very convenient--especially when you want to borrow money. If the Venezuelans, thinly distributed over an area of half a million square miles, mostly illiterate peasants, half-breeds, and indigenes, were educated, intelligent men, zealous only for the public weal, it would be possible for them to have a real republic. They have instead a government by cliques, tempered by revolution; and a very good government it is, in harmony with the physical conditions of the country and the national temperament. Now, it happens that the educated men, representing your higher classes, are so few that there are not many persons unconnected by ties of blood or marriage with prominent members of the political groups to which they belong. By this you will see how easy and almost inevitable it is that we should become accustomed to look on conspiracy and revolt against the regnant party--the men of another clique--as only in the natural order of things. In the event of failure such outbreaks are punished, but they are not regarded as immoral. On the contrary, men of the highest intelligence and virtue among us are seen taking a leading part in these adventures. Whether such a condition of things is intrinsically wrong or not, or would be wrong in some circumstances and is not wrong, because inevitable, in others, I cannot pretend to decide; and all this tiresome profusion is only to enable you to understand how I--a young man of unblemished character, not a soldier by profession, not ambitious of political distinction, wealthy for that country, popular in society, a lover of social pleasures, of books, of nature actuated, as I believed, by the highest motives, allowed myself to be drawn very readily by friends and relations into a conspiracy to overthrow the government of the moment, with the object of replacing it by more worthy men ourselves, to wit. Our adventure failed because the authorities got wind of the affair and matters were precipitated. Our leaders at the moment happened to be scattered over the country--some were abroad; and a few hotheaded men of the party, who were in Caracas just then and probably feared arrest, struck a rash blow: the President was attacked in the street and wounded. But the attackers were seized, and some of them shot on the following day. When the news reached me I was at a distance from the capital, staying with a friend on an estate he owned on the

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