

## LOST — AN AMERICAN

*by Georgia Atwood White*

ONE autumn morning in 1904, I was entering the gateway of the British Museum, accompanied by an English friend. As we approached the wide stone steps, he put his hand on my arm.

"Look! There is Hudson, the naturalist, coming."

Advancing towards us at a swift but uneven pace, came an extremely tall and ungainly figure. His head was bent forward as if the weight of Atlas were on his broad stooped shoulders and his nose, like the beak of some predatory bird, was well in advance of the rest of his body. Like rapiers, his eyes gleamed at me from under his bushy eyebrows. He carried his long arms swinging a little behind his hips as if he were about to jump forward at the next step. In his appearance, there was nothing in common with the crowd through which he was ploughing his way.

"That man is no Englishman."

"But you are mistaken—quite. He was born in South America, to be sure, but he's a colonial, nevertheless."

I turned back to the Museum entrance, unconvinced. Before my mind's eye streamed a procession of New England men, of Yankees, of old uncles coming in from the hay fields, tall, gaunt, shrewd but kindly, and shabbily dressed. They seemed the shadowy brothers of this man who had just passed by. Once there was a man of New England ancestry who split rails in a western state. You

never could have imagined him to be any one but a Yankee, no matter where circumstances might have placed him. Such a figure had William H. Hudson.

Yet I was not foolish enough to mention my impressions to my English friend. He would have said in a bantering tone, "That's another one of your wild American ideas. No! You cannot claim this man of Nature. He is ours".

Still, I felt I had not reached the bottom of the matter. It then became a pleasant occupation of mine to track down in all of Hudson's essays any reference he might make to his childhood and parentage, but I could find nothing to back up my intuitions at that time. Instead, I found a curious slighting of the subject of the United States. One epithet in a solitary mention of our country was hardly flattering, when he spoke of Hawthorne, "coming to the Old Home from that outlandish United States".

He quoted Thoreau once, in a description of squirrels that adds lustre to his own narrative; but his most severe criticism was for Dr. Holmes's story of *Elsie Venner*, the serpent girl. He introduced a lengthy essay on it by saying:

Ordinarily, in considering an excellent romance we are rightly careless about the small inaccuracies with regard to matters of fact which may appear in it; for the writer who is able to produce a work of art must not and cannot be a specialist or a microscopist. Dr. Holmes'

work is an exception. We distinctly refuse to overlook its distortions of fact and false inferences in the province of zoölogy.

After two pages of similar condemnation, he wrote that he wished that Hawthorne had had this conception for he would have been able to handle it in a better manner. However true this criticism may be, it seems surprising to have it come from one who already had written a tale with much the same motive, portraying a girl, half-bird and half-human, in Rima of *Green Mansions*. We had accepted that poetic and ethereal tale as a fantasy, not calling Hudson to account for the impossibility of establishing her peculiar traits on scientific facts; neither would we wish to mar its eerie magic by doing so. Only two American authors won his admiration, Hawthorne and Herman Melville whose *Moby Dick* he considered the "great American Book". In the transcendentalism of Hawthorne and the animism of Melville he found an echo of his own soul.

When the publication of *Far Away and Long Ago* was announced in 1918, I awaited the first copy of the American edition with feverish interest. Would I find in that autobiographical account some answer to my questionings? I fear the matchless prose was skimmed over, in the first reading, by my rapid search for the salient facts of his early life. At last, on Page 316, among the many beautiful tributes he had paid to his mother were these words:

To her, a child of New England parents and ancestors, reared in an intensely religious atmosphere, the people of the pampas, among whom her lot was cast, must have appeared like inhabitants of another world. They were as strange to her soul, morally and spiritually, as they were unlike her own people outwardly, in language, dress and customs.

This was the only reference he made to his mother's country, but it was an arresting finger-post, pointing me to a more thorough search of his autobiography for those homely

little details that slip unnoticed into any man's account of his childhood, even if he thinks he has suppressed the main facts.

No New England woman can be transplanted anywhere in the world, whether it be China or the Argentine, and not take New England ways with her. Let us see if Hudson, now an old man of seventy-five, ill and alone on his bed in cold and dour Cornwall, remembers the foods his mother cooked for her boys in sunny Argentine.

Yes, here they are, listed on Page 200, with sturdy American names. Hot corn cakes with syrup for breakfast; potato salad with onions; peach preserves with hot bread for supper; pumpkin and apple pies with crusts; sweet potatoes and, above all, pickled peaches! Memories of farm kitchens with spicy odors on September mornings, transferred to the pampas of the Argentine! Many a Spanish *ranchero* came to taste her pickled peaches at the hospitable table of the Hudsons and took away the recipe to preserve the glutted harvest of peaches for the winter, which before that had rotted on the ground. If Hudson had been brought up on English viands he would have longed for kidney pie and tart and custard.

He speaks of his mother's thrift, cleverness, neatness in housekeeping under trying conditions, her hospitality, her charity towards less fortunate neighbors, even to the point of nursing a starving Spanish baby along with her own little boy, and of her deeply religious nature. With such a mother, what curious obstinacy led him to ignore, so completely and apparently intentionally, her country and its delegated influence on his childish years?

William H. Hudson died in 1922 and in 1924 Morley Roberts brought out his biography which he calls *A Portrait*.

On Page 6 are these illuminating facts. Not only was Katherine Kimble, his mother, a native of the state of Maine, but his father, Daniel Hudson, and his uncles were born in Marblehead, Massachusetts, and their

births recorded in the vital statistics of the Second Congregational Church of that town. His father was born in 1804, married in the same town, and when Daniel Hudson developed tuberculosis, the young couple emigrated to the Argentine, becoming the first American pioneers in sheep raising in the Rio de La Plata state. Their son, William, was born at Quilmes and baptized at Buenos Aires in the First Methodist Episcopal Church (American).

It was William H. Hudson's grandfather who came to America from Exeter, England, in the Eighteenth Century. The question now is what racial impress has a man, whose mother was a descendant of the Pilgrim Fathers, whose father was also an American of the first generation and whose own birthplace was a colony of Spain? Not until he was sixty years of age did Hudson become a naturalized Englishman. These facts seem very unwelcome to Hudson's "Boswell", for he, too, does not refer to the United States except by a petty fling at the origin of Hudson's mother, saying, "her family were said to possess a Bible brought over in the *Mayflower*, which appears to have been much burdened with Bibles".

Mr. Roberts acknowledges that facts about his subject are very elusive. Hudson destroyed family letters, personal data, disregarded facts and purposely mislaid dates. He deliberately mystified his friends about his birthplace when he spoke of Exeter, England, as "his natal city", and put his birth in 1846 instead of 1840. He insisted that England was his homeland, much to the amusement of his family.

His biographer conceded again and again his inability to picture his subject in an accurate account, in spite of his friendship of forty years. We suspect he stands a little too close to his friend to focus the picture for us, who know Hudson only through *Green Mansions* and *Far Away and Long Ago*. In the dialogues and diary, also, we see more of Mr. Roberts than we do of Hudson; lit-

tle Roberts, scared and worshipping, circling around his caged eagle but well out of the reach of the talons.

Mr. Hudson's traditional British frame of mind towards all things American may be easily understood when we reflect that he matured his judgments in the Nineteenth Century under unusual circumstances. The Hudson family in the Argentine was surrounded by British settlers. Their children were tutored by itinerant English teachers and an Irish priest. There could be little communication in those years with their people in the north, when one letter would take many months to reach New England and cost as many dollars for transmission from hand to hand by the captains of the coastwise ships. American literature was still in its infancy, the Hudson children, in consequence, being nurtured on Dickens and Thackeray and the Brontës. All political news came by way of London. Hudson's father was a man of peace, good natured, unassertive, never seeking argument with his neighbors. His most shining virtues were his fatal defects, which ended in financial disaster. Mr. and Mrs. Hudson had left Marblehead while slaves were still peaceably and comfortably employed in the best families.

From the child of such a couple, one would not expect a militant partisanship for either side in our Civil War. A young man brought up by his tutors to regard the American Revolution as "a rebellion against the mother country" would not be interested in America's struggles to maintain the Union, although there flowed in his veins from his mother's side the rebellious blood of the patriots. He lived in the midst of revolutions and counter-revolutions of bombastic Latin type and doubtless regarded the affairs of the United States in the same light. Mr. Roberts had evidently profited by reading Samuel Butler's remarks on hereditary influence:

Accidents which happen to a man before he is born, in the person of his ancestors, will leave

an indelible impression upon him. They will have molded his character so, do what he will, it is hardly possible for him to escape their consequences.

First, Mr. Roberts acknowledges that types of men like Hudson are sometimes found in England but are extremely rare. He draws attention to the peculiar voices of the men of the Hudson family, their cackling laugh and high head tones.

Did he never hear the Yankee nasal twang of our natives?

Did he never notice the loose-jointed suppleness of our Olympian athletes or the tall, sinewy stature of our men in the Great War?

Yet, remembering that he must look for ancestral traits to solve the riddle of Hudson's peculiar characteristics, he takes a long jump backward even for a biographer—from the Argentine to post-glacial Britain of four thousand years ago! He finds great joy in proving that Hudson's head measurements are those of the ancient "beaker" man who ranged the British Isles after the ice period, building barrows for his burial mounds and leaving in them the "beaker" from which he drank as a testimony of his existence.

We admire Mr. Roberts's agility in this far backward somersault through the ages, but what a pity that he did not stop awhile with us and see the "beaker" man who is so scarce in Britain in full operation here. What a delightful tea party that must have been when Mr. Roberts secured the presence of the great anthropologist, Sir Arthur Keith, and Mr. Hudson submitted to having his head measured. What satisfaction it was to them all to explain the large brachycephalic brain index of the naturalist as the entire product of the British "beaker" man.

Not long ago, I was spending a few weeks in Cornwall at Penzance, where Hudson went so often in his later years and where he died. Having at last learned his antecedents, I thought as I strolled down the crooked, paved streets of that old seaport town, how like Marblehead in the western world it was.

Is there any place in England more like the wild coast of Maine or the rocks of Cape Ann than this strip of Cornwall from Land's End to Devon? Surely these "accidents before birth" are wonderfully strong in their far-reaching call down the years.

I talked with the bookseller on the steep side street. He had passed many an hour beside Hudson in his lodging house around the corner. Telling me of the old man's pathetic fear of age and death, of his eccentricities and obstinacies, of his irritable ways, yet his kindliness towards all birds, beasts and humans who deserved it, he wound up with this eulogy: "He was a rare one, a rough old chap; but you know I liked him—rather".

Academic science has always looked at Hudson askance. Samuel Butler had taught him "to throw too many brickbats", but his value to the world was not whether this or that bird acted in this or that manner. It was whether your eyes were directed to the bird, so you could see for yourself.

He hated women who wore feathers and peasants who caught songbirds on cruel hooks as they flung themselves at the cliffs of England in their great annual migrations. He hated the breed of bishops who allowed their cooks to imprison wretched white owls in their fiery palace kitchens. He would have refused to eat birds at the King's table. He was what we would call a "character". Strange among English ways, he did not belong to them by birth, carriage, looks or customs, yet he interpreted England of the countryside to Englishmen with a passionate ardor such as has never been since Gilbert White of Selborne studied nature in a limed corner of southern England.

In spite of his studied avoidance of truth, William H. Hudson is a *lost* American, belonging with Henry Thoreau and John Burroughs, and akin to Walt Whitman and Herman Melville.

If his brother could say to him at his parting in Buenos Aires, "Of all the people I

have ever known, you are the only one I do not know", how can we hope to fathom his reasons for so obstinately covering the facts of his inheritances not only from his public but from his biographer?

Is this hiatus the underlying reason for that ugly thread that appears and re-appears in the tapestry of his life—an unhappy feeling (even among his greatest admirers) that truth has been sacrificed to incident and turn of phrase? Is this why the world of literature claims him and acclaims him, while Science turns a cold shoulder?

The ability to stretch the truth to fit one's

pattern, he says, is a literary asset. If his pattern had been followed out in the clearer air of North America, if he had been surrounded by the pioneer spirit he was familiar with, would not his rugged character have responded in amiability and truthfulness?

If, at twenty-eight years of age, he had taken the other turning—if the day he left South America forever he had gone to New York instead of Southampton—would he not have found among his own people a much quicker and fuller reward than the tardy recognition given him by the England he had adopted with almost fanatical ardor?

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## THE BIRTH OF NICK CARTER

*by Russell M. Coryell*

ADJOINING our place in Cornwall, New York, there was a farmer by the name of Pigott. Mr. Pigott had some of the juiciest Northern Spy apples that I ever had the pleasure of stealing. He also had some of the strongest objections to having them stolen. As boys, we credited him with a willingness to shoot our pants full of rock-salt if he caught us. I don't remember that this kept our gang from visiting his orchard, but it certainly made us more cautious and gave us a great thrill. In consequence, we developed a definite technique of escape. When we sighted him from the branches, instead of jumping down and running for our own homes, we ran toward the home of some boy who was not in the party.

On one occasion in particular, two of us, Walter Younge and myself, were very nearly trapped—we must either run back toward my home or toward Mr. Pigott's. We chose the latter and got so involved that we had to duck into Mr. Pigott's own barn and hide in the hay-loft, burrowing down under the hay. Once there, we were afraid to come out; so, to pass the time, Walter began telling me in a subdued whisper about the thrilling exploits of Nick Carter. Until then, I had never heard of the great detective. Walter was under the impression that Nick was a real man, in some way allied with Jesse James, and he said his parents had licked him for reading about him. He warned me not to let my mother and father know he had told me the stories.

Walter told his stories with thrilling directness, plunging into the murders and hair-breadth escapes with a primitive power that stirred my imagination. He also dramatized the necessity for maintaining absolute secrecy at home. I realized at once that Nick Carter was a thoroughly illicit pleasure and swore that I would not tell my people. From then on, the Nick Carter stories were always associated in my mind with the pleasures of wrongdoing—and I was exceedingly careful not to mention the name of Nick Carter before my father or mother.

But things came to an unexpected head one day. While prowling around the attic, profiting by my parents' absence to open trunks that I had always desired to open, I came upon a big bundle wrapped in brown paper that was filled with scrap-books. To my great surprise, the scrap-books were filled with newspaper clippings, juvenile stories which I knew my father had written, and—marvelous to relate—the forbidden tales of Nick Carter cut from the original pages of *The New York Weekly*. The illustrations thrilled me. My excitement was at its height.

I debated with myself the advisability of keeping my discovery secret. I had no desire to confess that I had been rummaging in the Blue Beard trunks, but at the same time my curiosity was bubbling. Caution was forgotten. I lugged the heavy bundle downstairs and confronted my mother and father with it when they returned.