

The Purple Land

W. H. Hudson was a naturalist, an ornithologist, and a writer. His British grandparents emigrated to the United States and settled in Boston. Their children later moved to Argentina, where Hudson was born in 1841. He grew up in the camp and developed a keen interest in the natural world. When he was thirty-three, he completed his family's triangular migration pattern by moving to England, where he remained until his death in 1922. Once settled in London, Hudson began writing about his youthful experiences in the Río de la Plata region. In 1885 he published his first book, *The Purple Land*, which draws on his memories of a visit he made to Uruguay in the 1860s.

The plot is a simple one: Richard Lamb, a young Englishman, marries an underage Argentine girl in Buenos Aires and they run away to Uruguay to escape her father's wrath. He leaves his wife with a relative in Montevideo, saddles up a horse, and rides off to find work. His travels take him across the country, where he has many adventures and meets interesting characters while observing the landscape and the culture of its inhabitants. This novel is considered a classic; it has been compared to both the *Odyssey* and *Don Quixote*.

It was a perilous time to be traveling alone in the wilds of Uruguay. After gaining its independence in 1828, the country suffered decades of internecine warfare between its two main political factions, the *Blancos* and the *Colorados*. The slaughter Lamb witnesses inspires the title of the book, for, as he says: "What more suitable name can one find for a country so stained with the blood of her children?" Though frequently in danger, he is resourceful and seems quite at home with the language and customs of the Banda Oriental [Eastern Strip], as Uruguay was known in those days. He knows that if he drops in at a modest shack or a grand home on an estancia at mealtime, he will be invited to partake of whatever is being served. In this way he spends time with a cross section of Uruguayans, sharing the inevitable *yerba*

mate and tobacco and enjoying the conversation that goes with them.

Lamb meets several women on his travels, some of whom evidently make a deep impression. One of them challenges him to join the rebel army, despite his abhorrence of violence and his belief that, as a foreigner, he should remain above such local affairs. Will beautiful, passionate Dolores tempt the principled Englishman to betray his marriage vows? Will he take up arms as she urges him to do? Hudson is a skilful storyteller; he sets up intriguing scenarios that had this reader turning pages, anxious to find out what happens next. As a naturalist, he also provides descriptions of the Uruguayan countryside: "Occasionally, the long, clear cry of the *ventevéo*, a lemon-coloured bird with black head and long beak like a kingfisher, rang through the foliage."

One of the main functions of a novel is to show how a character evolves over time. Here, Hudson chronicles the transformation of his protagonist's feelings about Uruguay. At the beginning of the story, when Lamb arrives in Montevideo, he is critical of Uruguayans, deeming them unworthy of the beautiful land they inhabit. He laments that, when the British invaded in 1807, they didn't stay and impose their way of life. Halfway through the book, he is having second thoughts: "Oh, civilization, with your million conventions [...], your feverish striving after comforts that bring no comfort to the heart, are you a mistake altogether?"

At the end of the book, Lamb sits on the hill overlooking Montevideo and soliloquizes: "I cannot believe that if this country had been conquered and recolonized by England [...] my intercourse with the people would have had the wild, delightful flavour I have found in it. We do not live by bread alone, and British occupation does not give to the heart all the things for which it craves." Lamb came to Uruguay as a young Englishman who "regards the people of other nationalities with a certain amount of contempt." He then went native and developed a love for the country that stayed with him for the rest of his life.