

A PORTRAIT OF W. H. HUDSON

By Henry A. Lappin

IN 1912 Morley Roberts, having then completed exactly a quarter of a century of industrious and successful story telling, paused long enough from the confection of his admirable chronicles of adventure by flood and field to write, under the guise of an exercise in fiction, one of the minor masterpieces of English biography: "The Private Life of Henry Maitland". This book was at once acclaimed as not merely a faithful interpretative record of the pitiful career of the late George Gissing, but also as, in some sort, the precursor of a new biographical form. Now, after a further period of fictioneering, diversified by an incursion ("Warfare in the Human Body") into the realm of pathological physiology, Mr. Roberts returns, in his latest work, to the practice of the literary portrait painter's art.

Hudson gave Mr. Roberts many sittings. Indeed he sat to him for forty three years. The author tells us that, since he never expected to be

called on to write about his friend, he kept few letters and, until almost the end, made no notes of conversations or of personal impressions. So much the better, for he expressly disclaims all attempt at an exhaustive and documented Life. "A cloud of inconsiderable facts might destroy the picture", he wisely suggests. It was his design, by an accumulation of intimate impressions of his subject in varying moods and at intervals over many years, to evoke a veritable personality — Hudson in his habit as he lived, so to say. Indubitably he has succeeded, triumphantly succeeded in his aim.

None of the fashionable portrait painters of the day ever committed Hudson to canvas. Yet, as the author remarks with bitter truth, "he will be remembered when they and most of their sitters are dead dust". (Perhaps, one fancies, the late J. B. Yeats — that fastidious connoisseur of imaginative distinction, in whom, as in Hudson, the valor of the free spirit so radiantly flowered — might not have been wholly frustrate in his effort had he essayed to paint the artist of "Far Away and Long Ago".) But Hudson was no easy subject for any man's brush. "He kept his soul in a strong secret place", says Mr. Roberts. And elsewhere he likens his sitter to one in whom were twinned "a caged hawk and a reed-bunting singing by a river".

From Mr. Roberts's absorbingly interesting pages the student of Hudson's work will learn much that is indispensable to an understanding of his author. Here for the first time we are told the facts about Hudson's immediate forbears; about his early experiences in England of the Seventies; his secretaryship to a pedigree-pedler who derived the most uncertain of incomes by trading upon the Ameri-

can lust for family trees; his marriage and his dolorous vicissitudes as the husband of a London landlady, fifteen years his senior, who gave ineffectual music lessons in a heavily mortgaged rooming house; the painfully slow growth of his literary reputation.

Most of these facts will be new to many even of Hudson's friends, so reticent was he concerning his days of struggle. But what Mr. Roberts reveals of Hudson's mental and spiritual positions is of even deeper interest and value.

While the painter of this "portrait" has bestowed upon us a figure who at all points corresponds to our intuitions of Hudson lovingly amassed from his published volumes, while every stroke of his brush makes upon us the convincing impression of high imaginative truth, it is certain that the half has not been told us. One may well doubt whether it can ever be revealed. Garnett, Galsworthy, and H. J. Mas-singham — all true lovers of the man and his creations — have abundantly expressed their feelings about him. And now the most intimate of all his comrades speaks with uninhibited eloquence. Yet somehow Hudson abides not our question. Of the greatest English writers — to whose fellowship his right to belong may no longer be contested — he is very nearly the most enigmatic and secretive. Some part of the soul of him is exquisitely, unforgetably bared in book after book, yet he contrives to remain inexplicably remote and unsnared, and his communication of beauty to his readers is always strangely impersonal, as moonlight and sunrise are impersonal in their august beneficence. With the passing of Hudson, Galsworthy has recently declared, "the English-speaking world, perhaps the wide world, has lost its most unique personality". And the

loss will more and more keenly be felt
as the wide world grows older.

W. H. Hudson: A Portrait. By Morley
Roberts. E. P. Dutton and Co.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.