A W. H. HUDSON TRIO

By Henry A. Lappin

THESE three books are the last fruit of a noble tree, the final harvest of one of the wisest, simplest, and most beautiful of modern pens. Two of them, however, will not augment Hudson's fame. "Ralph Herne" and "Fan" are novels, and belong to the first, tentative period of his auctorial career. The former, now published for the first time, was written before 1885, before "The Purple Land", as the author himself informs us in an almost indecipherable autograph letter reproduced in facsimile as an introduction to this comely limited edition.

"Fan" was published in 1892, pseudonymously, in an edition of only three hundred copies. A short time before his death Hudson seems to have thought of forbidding the reissue of it on the ground that it was unworthy of his reputation.

Many pages of "Fan" recall the early work of George Gissing, whom Hudson must have read and known during the 'nineties. The first chapter, for example, is exactly in the key of "Workers in the Dawn", and chapters 39 and 40, in which Fan rediscovers her old friends Constance and Merton, and Merton airs his sociological views, are pure Gissing. The early Gissing falsetto—itself an infelicitous derivation from one of Gissing's masters, Dickens—is clearly audible in such a collocation as " . . . an occasional visit to the rougepot and other artificial means used by civilized ladies to mitigate the ravages of time". And this: "She was also a dressy dame and burdened her podgy fingers and broad bosom with too much gold." In many other passages the style definitely "dates". Thus the utterly priceless Miss Starbrow rants like the heroine of a Dion Boucicault melodrama: "Oh what a poor weak vile thing I am! No wonder I hate and despise women generally, knowing what I am myself—a woman! Yes,—a very woman,—the plaything, the creature, the slave of a man! Let him only be a man and show his manhood somehow by virtue or by vice, by god-like deeds or by crimes be they as black as night, and she must be his slave", etc. The creator of Rosa Dartle and Lady Dedlock poured out that sort of thing from a horn of plenty, but it was not all he poured. Then there are persiflagitious exchanges like this: "'I am very glad, Arthur, that you and Mary are such good friends.' 'I am so glad that you are glad that I'm glad', he returned airily, quoting Mallock."

Hudson's mastery of the art of prose is indisputable, but he was not and never could have made himself a novelist. Yet, if one's tastes are simple, it is possible to derive a mild and tranquil satisfaction from this unpretentious story of a young girl's life, of her rise from squalid poverty to affluence and social position. Certain paragraphs very delicately evoke rural and suburban atmospheres, and there is an exquisite bird song movement on pages 186, 187, that should be included in any representative anthology of the author's prose.

"Ralph Herne" is a much briefer tale. The setting of the story is Buenos Aires whither the hero, young Doctor Herne, has emigrated from London in the expectation of more rapid advancement in his profession. A year or so after his arrival in the South American city, the hero, depressed by his failure to realize his hopes, begins to behave quite unheroically, and speedily loses his medical standing and, to all appearances, the esteem of the girl with whom he has fallen irrevocably in love, despite the fact that she is betrothed to another. (I trust the reader will not resent this Victorian method of expression.) The young man's regeneration is at length triumphantly achieved and his local fame is made, when he emerges as the hero of the terrible Buenos Aires yellow fever epidemic. To be sure, Lettice, the young lady just mentioned, is one of the few survivors of that dreadful time and the concluding paragraph begins: "Sixteen years have gone by since their marriage." "Ralph Herne" is hardly more than an earnest and decorous Later Victorian novelette ("The Redemption of Doctor

Herne" shall we call it?). In one of his less inspired seasons Trollope could have turned it out in the mornings of a week; all of it, that is, except the handful of strangely powerful pages which depict the pestilence stricken city; and perhaps one should include some of the earlier descriptions of Buenos Aires and the neighborhood. But Trollope would have added some of his well known spices to the dish, and indeed "Ralph Herne", had the author of "Ralph the Heir" written it, would have been a better *story*.

"A Hind in Richmond Park", which the author left unfinished, was prepared for the printers, and in some degree reconstituted from the manuscript, by Morley Roberts, Hudson's oldest friend and comrade. It is a collection of essays and papers upon "a variety of questions concerning the senses", composed for the most part toward the end of Hudson's life. While the book deserves a high place among the most characteristic and delightful of this great writer's works, it is not, as several reviewers have suggested, his best. Doubtless that distinction must be reserved for "Nature in Downland", which is probably the most vital as it is certainly the most subtly poetical of the volumes which display Hudson's experiences and reflections as field naturalist. The hind in Richmond Park plays but a small part in the book upon which it bestows a name. The author's observations of the hind in chapter the first set him meditating upon the senses of animals, and soon he finds himself comparing the senses of animals and of men. By and by he is gamboling merrily—"a hind let loose"—through the sunlit glades of his memories and thoughts and dreams, his mind advancing surely and beautifully through the rich mazes of his subject.

Professional naturalists and students of science should learn much from "A Hind", but it was not written for them. It was written—as everything by Hudson has been written—for artists. And it is the artists who, having gone forth to spy out the land of this last major work of Hudson, and to see if it be fat or lean, will return after seven days with pomegranates and figs and a cluster of grapes that craves to be borne between two upon a staff. Hudson himself was artist first and foremost; the tale of his successive publications is almost the tale of his development as artist. His best writing is always that of one in whose veins—to use the lovely phrases of Thomas Traherne—the sea itself floweth, who is clothed with the heavens and crowned with the stars; whose passion for the visible world burns so hotly and brightly that he is "covetous and earnest to persuade others to enjoy it". Hudson saw everything as a child sees it, emotionally: his soul went out to meet what he saw. And thus "A Hind in Richmond Park", like all the ampler works of its author, is rich in rapture, in beauty, and in wisdom.

Ralph Herne. By W. H. Hudson. Alfred A. Knopf.

Fan: The Story of a Young Girl's Life. By Henry Harford (W. H. Hudson). E. P. Dutton and Co.

A Hind in Richmond Park. By W. H. Hudson. E. P. Dutton and Co.