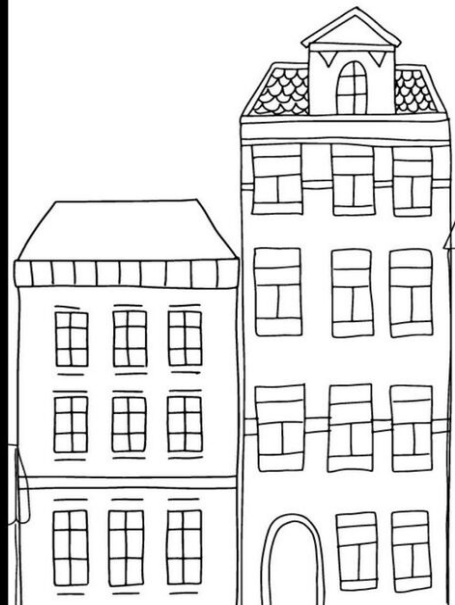
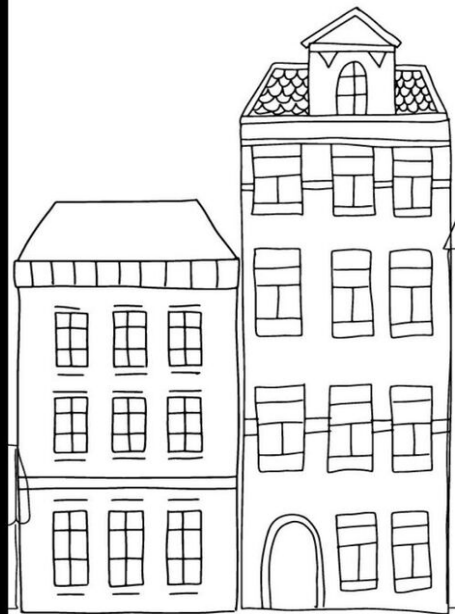


Sheba Blake Publishing Corp.

A CRYSTAL AGE

William Henry Hudson



Sheba Blake Publishing Corp.

A CRYSTAL AGE

William Henry Hudson



WILLIAM HENRY HUDSON

A Crystal Age

First published by Sheba Blake Publishing Corp. 2021

Copyright © 2021 by William Henry Hudson

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise without written permission from the publisher. It is illegal to copy this book, post it to a website, or distribute it by any other means without permission.

This novel is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is entirely coincidental.

William Henry Hudson asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

Sheba Blake Publishing Corp.

2288 Crossrail Dr

Atlanta, GA 30349

support@shebablake.com

First edition

Cover art by Sheba Blake

Editing by Sheba Blake

This book was professionally typeset on Reedsy

Find out more at reedsy.com



Contents

[Preface](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

Chapter 20

About the Author

Preface

Romances of the future, however fantastic they may be, have for most of us a perennial if mild interest, since they are born of a very common feeling—a sense of dissatisfaction with the existing order of things, combined with a vague faith in or hope of a better one to come. The picture put before us is false; we knew it would be false before looking at it, since we cannot imagine what is unknown any more than we can build without materials. Our mental atmosphere surrounds and shuts us in like our own skins; no one can boast that he has broken out of that prison. The vast, unbounded prospect lies before us, but, as the poet mournfully adds, “clouds and darkness rest upon it.” Nevertheless we cannot suppress all curiosity, or help asking one another, What is your dream—your ideal? What is your News from Nowhere, or, rather, what is the result of the little shake your hand has given to the old pasteboard toy with a dozen bits of colored glass for contents? And, most important of all, can you present it in a narrative or romance which will enable me to pass an idle hour not disagreeably? How, for instance, does it compare in this respect with other prophetic books on the shelf?

I am not referring to living authors; least of all to that flamingo of letters who for the last decade or so has been a wonder to our island birds. For what could I say of him that is not known to every one—that he is the tallest of fowls, land or water, of a most singular shape, and has black-tipped crimson wings folded under his delicate rose-colored plumage? These other books referred to, written, let us say, from thirty or forty years to a century or two

ago, amuse us in a way their poor dead authors never intended. Most amusing are the dead ones who take themselves seriously, whose books are pulpits quaintly carved and decorated with precious stones and silken canopies in which they stand and preach to or at their contemporaries.

In like manner, in going through this book of mine after so many years I am amused at the way it is colored by the little cults and crazes, and modes of thought of the 'eighties of the last century. They were so important then, and now, if remembered at all, they appear so trivial! It pleases me to be diverted in this way at "A Crystal Age"—to find, in fact, that I have not stood still while the world has been moving.

This criticism refers to the case, the habit, of the book rather than to its spirit, since when we write we do, as the red man thought, impart something of our souls to the paper, and it is probable that if I were to write a new dream of the future it would, though in some respects very different from this, still be a dream and picture of the human race in its forest period.

Alas that in this case the wish cannot induce belief! For now I remember another thing which Nature said—that earthly excellence can come in no way but one, and the ending of passion and strife is the beginning of decay. It is indeed a hard saying, and the hardest lesson we can learn of her without losing love and bidding good-by forever to hope.

W. H. H.

Chapter 1



I do not quite know how it happened, my recollection of the whole matter ebbing in a somewhat clouded condition. I fancy I had gone somewhere on a botanizing expedition, but whether at home or abroad I don't know. At all events, I remember that I had taken up the study of plants with a good deal of enthusiasm, and that while hunting for some variety in the mountains I sat down to rest on the edge of a ravine. Perhaps it was on the ledge of an overhanging rock; anyhow, if I remember rightly, the ground gave way all about me, precipitating me below. The fall was a very considerable one—probably thirty or forty feet, or more, and I was rendered unconscious. How long I lay there under the heap of earth and stones carried down in my fall it is impossible to say: perhaps a long time; but at last I came to myself and struggled up from the *debris*, like a mole coming to the surface of the earth to feel the genial sunshine on his dim eyeballs. I found myself standing (oddly enough, on all fours) in an immense pit created by the overthrow of a gigantic dead tree with a girth of about thirty or forty feet. The tree itself had rolled down to the bottom of the ravine; but the pit in which it had left the huge stumps of severed roots was, I found, situated in a gentle slope at the top of the bank! How, then, I could have fallen seemingly so far from no height at all, puzzled me greatly: it looked as if the solid earth had been indulging in some curious transformation pranks during those moments or minutes of insensibility. Another singular circumstance was that I had a great mass of

small fibrous rootlets tightly woven about my whole person, so that I was like a colossal basket-worm in its case, or a big man-shaped bottle covered with wicker-work. It appeared as if the roots had *grown* round me! Luckily they were quite sapless and brittle, and without bothering my brains too much about the matter, I set to work to rid myself of them. After stripping the woody covering off, I found that my tourist suit of rough Scotch homespun had not suffered much harm, although the cloth exuded a damp, moldy smell; also that my thick-soled climbing boots had assumed a cracked rusty appearance as if I had been engaged in some brick-field operations; while my felt hat was in such a discolored and battered condition that I felt almost ashamed to put it on my head. My watch was gone; perhaps I had not been wearing it, but my pocket-book in which I had my money was safe in my breast pocket.

Glad and grateful at having escaped with unbroken bones from such a dangerous accident, I set out walking along the edge of the ravine, which soon broadened to a valley running between two steep hills; and then, seeing water at the bottom and feeling very dry, I ran down the slope to get a drink. Lying flat on my chest to slake my thirst animal fashion, I was amazed at the reflection the water gave back of my face: it was, skin and hair, thickly encrusted with clay and rootlets! Having taken a long drink, I threw off my clothes to have a bath; and after splashing about for half an hour managed to rid my skin of its accumulations of dirt. While drying in the wind I shook the loose sand and clay from my garments, then dressed, and, feeling greatly refreshed, proceeded on my walk.

For an hour or so I followed the valley in its many windings, but, failing to see any dwelling-place, I ascended a hill to get a view of the surrounding country. The prospect which disclosed itself when I had got a couple of

hundred feet above the surrounding level, appeared unfamiliar. The hills among which I had been wandering were now behind me; before me spread a wide rolling country, beyond which rose a mountain range resembling in the distance blue banked-up clouds with summits and peaks of pearly whiteness. Looking on this scene I could hardly refrain from shouting with joy, so glad did the sunlit expanse of earth, and the pure exhilarating mountain breeze, make me feel. The season was late summer—that was plain to see; the ground was moist, as if from recent showers, and the earth everywhere had that intense living greenness with which it reclothes itself when the greater heats are over; but the foliage of the woods was already beginning to be touched here and there with the yellow and russet hues of decay. A more tranquil and soul-satisfying scene could not be imagined: the dear old mother earth was looking her very best; while the shifting golden sunlight, the mysterious haze in the distance, and the glint of a wide stream not very far off, seemed to spiritualize her “happy autumn fields,” and bring them into a closer kinship with the blue over-arching sky. There was one large house or mansion in sight, but no town, nor even a hamlet, and not one solitary spire. In vain I scanned the horizon, waiting impatiently to see the distant puff of white steam from some passing engine. This troubled me not a little, for I had no idea that I had drifted so far from civilization in my search for specimens, or whatever it was that brought me to this pretty, primitive wilderness. Not quite a wilderness, however, for there, within a short hour’s walk of the hill, stood the one great stone mansion, close to the river I had mentioned. There were also horses and cows in sight, and a number of scattered sheep were grazing on the hillside beneath me.

Strange to relate, I met with a little misadventure on account of the sheep—an animal which one is accustomed to regard as of a timid and inoffensive

nature. When I set out at a brisk pace to walk to the house I have spoken of, in order to make some inquiries there, a few of the sheep that happened to be near began to bleat loudly, as if alarmed, and by and by they came hurrying after me, apparently in a great state of excitement. I did not mind them much, but presently a pair of horses, attracted by their bleatings, also seemed struck at my appearance, and came at a swift gallop to within twenty yards of me. They were magnificent-looking brutes, evidently a pair of well-groomed carriage horses, for their coats, which were of a fine bronze color, sparkled wonderfully in the sunshine. In other respects they were very unlike carriage animals, for they had tails reaching to the ground, like funeral horses, and immense black leonine manes, which gave them a strikingly bold and somewhat formidable appearance. For some moments they stood with heads erect, gazing fixedly at me, and then simultaneously delivered a snort of defiance or astonishment, so loud and sudden that it startled me like the report of a gun. This tremendous equine blast brought yet another enemy on the field in the shape of a huge milk-white bull with long horns: a very noble kind of animal, but one which I always prefer to admire from behind a hedge, or at a distance through a field-glass. Fortunately his wrathful mutterings gave me timely notice of his approach, and without waiting to discover his intentions, I incontinently fled down the slope to the refuge of a grove or belt of trees clothing the lower portion of the hillside. Spent and panting from my run, I embraced a big tree, and turning to face the foe, found that I had not been followed: sheep, horses, and bull were all grouped together just where I had left them, apparently holding a consultation, or comparing notes.

The trees where I had sought shelter were old, and grew here and there, singly or in scattered groups: it was a pretty wilderness of mingled tree, shrub and flower. I was surprised to find here some very large and ancient-looking

fig-trees, and numbers of wasps and flies were busy feeding on a few over-ripe figs on the higher branches. Honey-bees also roamed about everywhere, extracting sweets from the autumn bloom, and filling the sunny glades with a soft, monotonous murmur of sound. Walking on full of happy thoughts and a keen sense of the sweetness of life pervading me, I presently noticed that a multitude of small birds were gathering about me, flitting through the trees overhead and the bushes on either hand, but always keeping near me, apparently as much excited at my presence as if I had been a gigantic owl, or some such unnatural monster. Their increasing numbers and incessant excited chirping and chattering at first served to amuse, but in the end began to irritate me. I observed, too, that the alarm was spreading, and that larger birds, usually shy of men—pigeons, jays, and magpies, I fancied they were—now began to make their appearance. Could it be, thought I with some concern, that I had wandered into some uninhabited wilderness, to cause so great a commotion among the little feathered people? I very soon dismissed this as an idle thought, for one does not find houses, domestic animals, and fruit-trees in desert places. No, it was simply the inherent cantankerousness of little birds which caused them to annoy me. Looking about on the ground for something to throw at them, I found in the grass a freshly-fallen walnut, and, breaking the shell, I quickly ate the contents. Never had anything tasted so pleasant to me before! But it had a curious effect on me, for, whereas before eating it I had not felt hungry, I now seemed to be famishing, and began excitedly searching about for more nuts. They were lying everywhere in the greatest abundance; for, without knowing it, I had been walking through a grove composed in large part of old walnut-trees. Nut after nut was picked up and eagerly devoured, and I must have eaten four or five dozen before my ravenous appetite was thoroughly appeased. During this feast I had paid no attention to the birds, but

when my hunger was over I began again to feel annoyed at their trivial persecutions, and so continued to gather the fallen nuts to throw at them. It amused and piqued me at the same time to see how wide of the mark my missiles went. I could hardly have hit a haystack at a distance of ten yards. After half an hour's vigorous practice my right hand began to recover its lost cunning, and I was at last greatly delighted when one of my nuts went hissing like a bullet through the leaves, not further than a yard from the wren, or whatever the little beggar was, I had aimed at. Their Impertinences did not like this at all; they began to find out that I was a rather dangerous person to meddle with: their ranks were broken, they became demoralized and scattered, in all directions, and I was finally left master of the field.

“Dolt that I am,” I suddenly exclaimed, “to be fooling away my time when the nearest railway station or hotel is perhaps twenty miles away.”

I hurried on, but when I got to the end of the grove, on the green sward near some laurel and juniper bushes, I came on an excavation apparently just made, the loose earth which had been dug out looking quite fresh and moist. The hole or foss was narrow, about five feet deep and seven feet long, and looked, I imagined, curiously like a grave. A few yards away was a pile of dry brushwood, and some faggots bound together with ropes of straw, all apparently freshly cut from the neighboring bushes. As I stood there, wondering what these things meant, I happened to glance away in the direction of the house where I intended to call, which was not now visible owing to an intervening grove of tall trees, and was surprised to discover a troop of about fifteen persons advancing along the valley in my direction. Before them marched a tall white-bearded old man; next came eight men, bearing a platform on their shoulders with some heavy burden resting upon it; and behind these followed the others. I began to think that they were actually

carrying a corpse, with the intention of giving it burial in that very pit beside which I was standing; and, although it looked most unlike a funeral, for no person in the procession wore black, the thought strengthened to a conviction when I became able to distinguish a recumbent, human-like form in a shroud-like covering on the platform. It seemed altogether a very unusual proceeding, and made me feel extremely uncomfortable; so much so that I considered it prudent to step back behind the bushes, where I could watch the doings of the processionists without being observed.

Led by the old man—who carried, suspended by thin chains, a large bronze censer, or brazier rather, which sent out a thin continuous wreath of smoke—they came straight on to the pit; and after depositing their burden on the grass, remained standing for some minutes, apparently to rest after their walk, all conversing together, but in subdued tones, so that I could not catch their words, although standing within fifteen yards of the grave. The uncoffined corpse, which seemed that of a full-grown man, was covered with a white cloth, and rested on a thick straw mat, provided with handles along the sides. On these things, however, I bestowed but a hasty glance, so profoundly absorbed had I become in watching the group of living human beings before me; for they were certainly utterly unlike any fellow-creatures I had ever encountered before. The old man was tall and spare, and from his snowy-white majestic beard I took him to be about seventy years old; but he was straight as an arrow, and his free movements and elastic tread were those of a much younger man. His head was adorned with a dark red skull-cap, and he wore a robe covering the whole body and reaching to the ankles, of a deep yellow or rhubarb color; but his long wide sleeves under his robe were dark red, embroidered with yellow flowers. The other men had no covering on their heads, and their luxuriant hair, worn to the shoulders, was, in most cases, very

dark. Their garments were also made in a different fashion, and consisted of a kilt-like dress, which came half-way to the knees, a pale yellow shirt fitting tight to the skin, and over it a loose sleeveless vest. The entire legs were cased in stockings, curious in pattern and color. The women wore garments resembling those of the men, but the tight-fitting sleeves reached only half-way to the elbow, the rest of the arm being bare; and the outergarment was all in one piece, resembling a long sleeveless jacket, reaching below the hips. The color of their dresses varied, but in most cases different shades of blue and subdued yellow predominated. In all, the stockings showed deeper and richer shades of color than the other garments; and in their curiously segmented appearance, and in the harmonious arrangement of the tints, they seemed to represent the skins of pythons and other beautifully variegated serpents. All wore low shoes of an orange-brown color, fitting closely so as to display the shape of the foot.

From the moment of first seeing them I had had no doubt about the sex of the tall old leader of the procession, his shining white beard being as conspicuous at a distance as a shield or a banner; but looking at the others I was at first puzzled to know whether the party was composed of men or women, or of both, so much did they resemble each other in height, in their smooth faces, and in the length of their hair. On a closer inspection I noticed the difference of dress of the sexes; also that the men, if not sterner, had faces at all events less mild and soft in expression than the women, and also a slight perceptible down on the cheeks and upper lip.

After a first hasty survey of the group in general, I had eyes for only one person in it—a fine graceful girl about fourteen years old, and the youngest by far of the party. A description of this girl will give some idea, albeit a very poor one, of the faces and general appearance of this strange people I had stumbled

on. Her dress, if a garment so brief can be called a dress, showed a slaty-blue pattern on a straw-colored ground, while her stockings were darker shades of the same colors. Her eyes, at the distance I stood from her, appeared black, or nearly black, but when seen closely they proved to be green—a wonderfully pure, tender sea-green; and the others, I found, had eyes of the same hue. Her hair fell to her shoulders; but it was very wavy or curly, and strayed in small tendril-like tresses over her neck, forehead and cheeks; in color it was golden black—that is, black in shade, but when touched with sunlight every hair became a thread of shining red-gold; and in some lights it looked like raven-black hair powdered with gold-dust. As to her features, the forehead was broader and lower, the nose larger, and the lips more slender, than in our most beautiful female types. The color was also different, the delicately molded mouth being purple-red instead of the approved cherry or coral hue; while the complexion was a clear dark, and the color, which mantled the cheeks in moments of excitement, was a dim or dusky rather than a rosy red.

The exquisite form and face of this young girl, from the first moment of seeing her, produced a very deep impression; and I continued watching her every movement and gesture with an intense, even a passionate interest. She had a quantity of flowers in her hand; but these sweet emblems, I observed, were all gayly colored, which seemed strange, for in most places white flowers are used in funeral ceremonies. Some of the men who had followed the body carried in their hands broad, three-cornered bronze shovels, with short black handles, and these they had dropped upon the grass on arriving at the grave. Presently the old man stooped and drew the covering back from the dead one's face—a rigid, marble-white face set in a loose mass of black hair. The others gathered round, and some standing, others kneeling, bent on the still countenance before them a long earnest gaze, as if taking an eternal farewell of