

# H.P.

By Sabine Baring-Gould

The river Vézère leaps to life among the granite of the Limousin, forms a fine cascade, the Saut de la Virolle, then after a rapid descent over mica-schist, it passes into the region of red sandstone at Brive, and swelled with affluents it suddenly penetrates a chalk district, where it has scooped out for itself a valley between precipices some two to three hundred feet high.

These precipices are not perpendicular, but overhang, because the upper crust is harder than the stone it caps; and atmospheric influences, rain and frost, have gnawed into the chalk below, so that the cliffs hang forward as penthouse roofs, forming shelters beneath them. And these shelters have been utilized by man from when the first occupants of the district arrived at a vastly remote period, almost uninterruptedly to the present day. When peasants live beneath these roofs of nature's providing, they simply wall up the face and ends to form houses of the cheapest description of construction, with the earth as the floor, and one wall and the roof of living rock, into which they burrow to form cupboards, bedplaces, and cellars.

The refuse of all ages is superposed, like the leaves of a book, one stratum above another in orderly succession. If we shear down through these beds, we can read the history of the land, so far as its manufacture goes, beginning at the present day and going down, down to the times of primeval man. Now, after every meal, the peasant casts down the bones he has picked, he does not stoop to collect and cast forth the sherds of a broken pot, and if a sou falls and rolls away, in the dust of these gloomy habitations it gets trampled into the soil, to form another token of the period of occupation.

When the first man settled here the climatic conditions were different. The mammoth or woolly elephant, the hyaena, the cave bear, and the reindeer ranged the land. Then naked savages, using only flint tools, crouched under these rocks. They knew nothing of metals and of pottery. They hunted and ate the horse; they had no dogs, no oxen, no sheep. Glaciers covered the centre of France, and reached down the Vézère valley as far as to Brive.

These people passed away, whither we know not. The reindeer retreated to the north, the hyena to Africa, which was then united to Europe. The mammoth became extinct altogether.

After long ages another people, in a higher condition of culture, but who also used flint tools and weapons, appeared on the scene, and took possession of the abandoned rock shelters. They fashioned their implements in a different manner by flaking the flint in place of chipping it. They understood the art of the potter. They grew flax and wove linen. They had domestic animals, and the dog had become the friend of man. And their flint weapons they succeeded in bringing to a high polish by incredible labour and perseverance.

Then came in the Age of Bronze, introduced from abroad, probably from the East, as its great depot was in the basin of the Po. Next arrived the Gauls, armed with weapons of iron. They were subjugated by the Romans, and Roman Gaul in turn became a prey to the Goth and the Frank. History has begun and is in full swing.

The medieval period succeeded, and finally the modern age, and man now lives on top of the accumulation of all preceding epochs of men and stages of civilization. In no other part of France, indeed of Europe, is the story of man told so plainly, that he who runs may read; and ever since the middle of last century, when this fact was recognized, the district has been studied, and explorations have been made there, some slovenly, others scientifically.

A few years ago I was induced to visit this remarkable region and to examine it attentively. I had been furnished with letters of recommendation from the authorities of the great Museum of National Antiquities at St German, to enable me to prosecute my researches unmolested by over-suspicious gendarmes and ignorant mayors.

Under one overhanging rock was a cabaret or tavern, announcing that wine was sold there, by a withered bush above the door.

The place seemed to me to be a probable spot for my exploration. I entered into an arrangement with the proprietor to enable me to dig, he stipulating that I should not undermine and throw down his walls. I engaged six labourers, and began proceedings by driving a tunnel some little way below the tavern into the vast bed of debris.

The upper series of deposits did not concern me much. The point I desired to investigate, and if possible to determine, was the approximate length of time that had elapsed between the disappearance of the reindeer hunters and the coming on the scene of the next race, that which used polished stone implements and had domestic animals.

Although it may seem at first sight as if both races had been savage, as both lived in the Stone Age, yet an enormous stride forward had been taken when men had learned the arts of weaving, of pottery, and had tamed the dog, the horse, and the cow. These new folk had passed out of the mere wild condition of the hunter, and had become pastoral and to some extent agricultural.

Of course, the data for determining the length of a period might be few, but I could judge whether a very long or a very brief period had elapsed between the two occupations by the depth of debris—chalk fallen from the roof, brought down by frost, in which were no traces of human workmanship.

It was with this distinct object in view that I drove my adit into the slope of rubbish some way below the cabaret, and I chanced to have hit on the level of the deposits of the men of bronze. Not that we found much bronze—all we secured was a broken pin—but we came on fragments of pottery marked with the chevron and nail and twisted thong ornament peculiar to that people and age.

My men were engaged for about a week before we reached the face of the chalk cliff. We found the work not so easy as I had anticipated. Masses of rock had become detached from above and had fallen, so that we had either to quarry through them or to circumvent them. The soil was of that curious coffee colour so inseparable from the chalk formation. We found many things brought down from above, a coin commemorative of the storming of the Bastille, and some small pieces of the later Roman emperors. But all of these were, of course, not in the solid ground below, but near the surface.

When we had reached the face of the cliff, instead of sinking a shaft I determined on carrying a gallery down an incline, keeping the rock as a wall on my right, till I reached the bottom of all.

The advantage of making an incline was that there was no hauling up of the earth by a bucket let down over a pulley, and it was easier for myself to descend.

I had not made my tunnel wide enough, and it was tortuous. When I began to sink, I set two of the men to smash up the masses of fallen chalk rock, so as to widen the tunnel, so that I might use barrows. I gave strict orders that all the material brought up was to be picked over by two of the most intelligent of the men, outside in the blaze of the sun. I was not desirous of sinking too expeditiously; I wished to proceed slowly, cautiously, observing every stage as we went deeper.

We got below the layer in which were the relics of the Bronze Age and of the men of polished stone, and then we passed through many feet of earth that rendered nothing, and finally came on the traces of the reindeer period.

To understand how that there should be a considerable depth of the debris of the men of the rude stone implements, it must be explained that these men made their hearths on the bare ground, and feasted around their fires, throwing about them the bones they had picked, and the ashes, and broken and disused implements, till the ground was inconveniently encumbered. Then they swept all the refuse together over their old hearth, and established another on top. So the process went on from generation to generation.

For the scientific results of my exploration I must refer the reader to the journals and memoirs of learned societies. I will not trouble him with them here.

On the ninth day after we had come to the face of the cliff and when we had reached a considerable depth, we uncovered some human bones. I immediately adopted special precautions, so that these should not be disturbed. With the utmost care the soil was removed from over them, and it took us half a day to completely clear a perfect skeleton. It was that of a full-grown man, lying on his back, with the skull supported against the wall of chalk rock. He did not seem to have been buried. Had he been so, he would doubtless have been laid on his side in a contracted posture, with the chin resting on the knees.

One of the men pointed out to me that a mass of fallen rock lay beyond his feet, and had apparently shut him in, so that he had died through suffocation, buried under the earth that the rock had brought down with it.

I at once despatched a man to my hotel to fetch my camera, that I might by flashlight take a photograph of the skeleton as it lay; and another I sent to get from the chemist and grocer as much gum arabic and isinglass as could be procured. My object was to give to the bones a bath of gum to render them less brittle when removed, restoring to them the gelatine that had been absorbed by the earth and lime in which they lay.

Thus I was left alone at the bottom of my passage, the four men above being engaged in straightening the entrance and sifting the earth.

I was quite content to be alone, so that I might at my ease search for traces of personal ornament worn by the man who had thus met his death. The place was somewhat cramped, and there really was not room in it for more than one person to work freely.

Whilst I was thus engaged, I suddenly heard a shout, followed by a crash, and, to my dismay, an avalanche of rubble shot down the inclined passage of descent. I at once left the skeleton, and hastened to effect my exit, but found that this was impossible. Much of the super-incumbent earth and stone had fallen, dislodged by the vibrations caused by the picks of the men smashing up the chalk blocks, and the passage was completely choked. I was sealed up in the hollow where I was, and thankful that the earth above me had not fallen as well, and buried me, a man of the present enlightened age, along with the primeval savage of eight thousand years ago.

A large amount of matter must have fallen, for I could not hear the voices of the men.

I was not seriously alarmed. The workmen would procure assistance and labour indefatigably to release me; of that I could be certain. But how much earth had fallen? How much of the passage was choked, and how long would they take before I was released? All that was uncertain. I had a candle, or, rather, a bit of one, and it was not probable that it would last till the passage was cleared. What made me most anxious was the question whether the supply of air in the hollow in which I was enclosed would suffice.

My enthusiasm for prehistoric research failed me just then. All my interests were concentrated on the present and I gave up groping about the skeleton for relics. I seated myself on a stone, set the candle in a socket of chalk I had scooped out with my pocket-knife, and awaited events with my eyes on the skeleton.

Time passed somewhat wearily. I could hear an occasional thud, thud, when the men were using the pick; but they mostly employed the shovel, as I supposed. I set my elbows on my knees and rested my chin in my hands. The air was not cold, nor was the soil damp; it was dry as snuff. The flicker of my light played over the man of bones, and especially illuminated the skull. It may have been fancy on my part, it probably was fancy, but it seemed to me as though something sparkled in the eye-sockets. Drops of water possibly lodged there, or crystals formed within the skull; but the effect was much as of eyes leering and winking at me. I lighted my pipe, and to my disgust found that my supply of matches was running short. In France the manufacture belongs to the state, and one gets but sixty *allumettes* for a penny.

I had not brought my watch with me below ground, fearing lest it might meet with an accident; consequently I was unable to reckon how time passed. I began counting and ticking off the minutes on my fingers, but soon tired of doing this.

My candle was getting short; it would not last much longer, and then I should be in the dark. I consoled myself with the thought that with the extinction of the light the consumption of the oxygen in the air would be less rapid. My eyes now rested on the flame of the candle, and I watched the gradual diminution of the composite. It was one of those abominable *bougies* with holes in them to economize the wax, and which consequently had less than the proper amount of material for feeding and maintaining aflame. At length the light went out, and I was left in total darkness. I might have used up the rest of my matches, one after another, but to what good?—they would prolong the period of illumination for but a very little while. A sense of numbness stole over me, but I was not as yet sensible of deficiency of air to breathe. I found that the stone on which I was seated was pointed and hard, but I did not like to shift my position for fear of getting among and disturbing the bones, and I was still desirous of having them photographed *in situ* before they were moved.

I was not alarmed at my situation; I knew that I must be released eventually. But the tedium of sitting there in the dark and on a pointed stone was becoming intolerable.

Some time must have elapsed before I became, dimly at first, and then distinctly, aware of a bluish phosphorescent emanation from the skeleton. This seemed to rise above it like a faint smoke, which gradually gained consistency, took form, and became distinct; and I saw before me the misty, luminous form of a naked man, with wolfish countenance, prognathous jaws, glaring at me out of eyes deeply sunk under projecting brows. Although I thus describe what I saw, yet it gave me no idea of substance; it was vaporous, and yet it was articulate. Indeed, I cannot say at this moment whether I actually saw this apparition with my eyes, or whether it was a dream-like vision of the brain. Though luminous, it cast no light on the walls of the cave; if I raised my hand it did not obscure any portion of the form presented to me. Then I heard: "I will tear you with the nails of my fingers and toes, and rip you with my teeth."

"What have I done to injure and incense you?" I asked.

And here I must explain. No word was uttered by either of us; no word could have been uttered by this vaporous form. It had no material lungs, nor throat, nor mouth to form vocal sounds. It had but the semblance of a man. It was a spook, not a human being. But from it proceeded thought-waves, odyllic force which smote on the tympanum of my mind or soul, and thereon registered the ideas formed by it. So in like manner I thought my replies, and they were communicated back in the same manner. If vocal words had passed between us neither would have been intelligible to the other. No dictionary was ever compiled, or would be compiled, of the tongue of prehistoric man; moreover, the grammar of the speech of that race would be absolutely incomprehensible to man now. But thoughts can be interchanged without words.

When we think we do not think in any language. It is only when we desire to communicate our thoughts to other men that we shape them into words and express them vocally in structural grammatical sentences. The beasts have never attained to this, yet they can communicate with one another, not by language, but by thought vibrations.

I must further remark that when I give what ensued as a conversation, I have to render the thought intercommunication that passed between the Homo Praehistoricus—the prehistoric man—and me, in English as best I can render it I knew as we conversed that I was not speaking to him in English, nor in French, nor Latin, nor in any tongue whatever. Moreover, when I use the words “said” or “spoke”, I mean no more than that the impression was formed by my brain-pan or the receptive drum of my soul, was produced by the rhythmic, orderly sequence of thought-waves. When, however, I express the words “screamed” or “shrieked,” I signify that those vibrations came sharp and swift and when I say “laughed,” that they came in a choppy, irregular fashion, conveying the idea, not the sound of laughter.

“I will tear you! I will rend you to bits and throw you in pieces about this cave!” shrieked the Homo Praehistoricus, or primeval man.

Again I remonstrated, and inquired how I had incensed him. But yelling with rage, he threw himself upon me. In a moment I was enveloped in a luminous haze, strips of phosphorescent vapour laid themselves about me, but I received no injury whatever, only my spiritual nature was subjected to something like a magnetic storm. After a few moments the spook disengaged itself from me, and drew back to where it was before, screaming broken exclamations of meaningless rage, and jabbering savagely. It rapidly cooled down.

“Why do you wish me in?” I asked again.

“I cannot hurt you. I am spirit, you are matter, and spirit cannot injure matter; my nails are psychic phenomena. Your soul you can lacerate yourself; but I can effect nothing, nothing.”

“Then why have you attacked me? What is the cause of your impotent resentment?”

“Because you are a son of the twentieth century, and I lived eight thousand years ago. Why are you nursed in the lap of luxury? Why do you enjoy comforts, a civilization that we knew nothing of? It is not just It is cruel on us. We had nothing, nothing, literally nothing, not even lucifer matches!”

Again he fell to screaming, as might a caged monkey rendered furious by failure to obtain an apple which he could not reach.

“I am very sorry, but it is no fault of mine.”

“Whether it be your fault or not does not matter to me. You have these things—we had not. Why, I saw you just now strike a light on the sole of your boot. It was done in a moment. We had only flint and ironstone, and it took half a day with us to kindle a fire, and then it flayed our knuckles with continuous knocking. No! we had nothing, nothing—no lucifer matches, no commercial travellers, no Benedictine, no pottery, no metal, no education, no elections, no *chocolat menier*.”

“How do you know about these products of the present age, here, buried under fifty feet of soil for eight thousand years?”

“It is my spirit which speaks with your spirit. My spook does not always remain with my bones. I can go up; rocks and stones and earth heaped over me do not hold me down. I am often above. I am in the tavern overhead. I have seen men drink there. I have seen a bottle of Benedictine. I have applied my psychical lips to it, but I could taste, absorb nothing. I have seen commercial travellers there, cajoling the patron into buying things he did not want. They are

mysterious, marvellous beings, their powers of persuasion are little short of miraculous. What do you think of doing with me?"

"Well, I propose first of all photographing you, then soaking you in gum arabic, and finally transferring you to a museum."

He screamed as though with pain, and gasped: "Don't! don't do it. It will be torture insufferable."

"But why so? You will be under glass, in a polished oak or mahogany box."

"Don't! You cannot understand what it will be to me—a spirit more or less attached to my body, to spend ages upon ages in a museum with fibulae, triskeili, palstaves, celts, torques, scarabs. We cannot travel very far from our bones—our range is limited. And conceive of my feelings for centuries condemned to wander among glass cases containing prehistoric antiquities, and to hear the talk of scientific men alone. Now here, it is otherwise. Here I can pass up when I like into the tavern, and can see men get drunk, and hear commercial travellers hoodwink the patron, and then when the taverner finds he has been induced to buy what he did not want, I can see him beat his wife and smack his children. There is something human, humorous, in that, but fibulae, palstaves, torques —bah!"

"You seem to have a lively knowledge of antiquities," I observed. "Of course I have. There come archaeologists here and eat their sandwiches above me, and talk prehistoric antiquities till I am sick. Give me life! Give me something interesting!"

"But what do you mean when you say that you cannot travel far from your bones?"

"I mean that there is a sort of filmy attachment that connects our psychic nature with our mortal remains. It is like a spider and its web. Suppose the soul to be the spider and the skeleton to be the web. If you break the thread the spider will never find its way back to its home. So it is with us; there is an attachment, a faint thread of luminous spiritual matter that unites us to our earthly husk. It is liable to accidents. It sometimes gets broken, sometimes dissolved by water. If a black beetle crawls across it it suffers a sort of paralysis. I have never been to the other side of the river, I have feared to do so, though very anxious to look at that creature like a large black caterpillar called the Train."

"This is news to me. Do you know of any case of rupture of connection?"

"Yes," he replied. "My old father, after he was dead some years, got his link of attachment broken, and he wandered about disconsolate. He could not find his own body, but he lighted on that of a young female of seventeen, and he got into that. It happened most singularly that her spook, being frolicsome and inconsiderate, had got its bond also broken, and she, that is her spirit, straying about in quest of her body, lighted on that of my venerable parent, and for want of a better took possession of it. It so chanced that after a while they met and became chummy. In the world of spirits there is no marriage, but there grow up spiritual attachments, and these two got rather fond of each other, but never could puzzle it out which was which and what each was; for a female soul had entered into an old male body, and a male soul had taken up its residence in a female body. Neither could riddle out of which sex each was. You see they had no education. But I know that my father's soul became quite sportive in that young woman's skeleton."

"Did they continue chummy?"

"No; they quarrelled as to which was which, and they are not now on speaking terms. I have two great-uncles. Theirs is a sad tale. Their souls were not wandering one day, and inadvertently they crossed and recrossed each other's tracks so that their spiritual threads of attachment got twisted. They found this out, and that they were getting tangled up. What one of them should have done would have been to have stood still and let the other jump over and dive under his

brother's thread till he had cleared himself. But my maternal great-uncles—I think I forgot to say they were related to me through my mother—they were men of peppery tempers and they could not understand this. They had no education. So they jumped one this way and one another, each abusing the other, and made the tangle more complete. That was about six thousand years ago, and they are now so knotted up that I do not suppose they will be dear of one another till time is no more."

He paused and laughed.

Then I said: "It must have been very hard for you to be without pottery of any sort."

"It was," replied H.P. (this stands for Homo Praehistoricus, not for House-Parlourmaid or Hardy Perennial), "very hard. We had skins for water and milk—"

"Oh! you had milk. I supposed you had no cows."

"Nor had we, but the reindeer were beginning to get docile and be tamed. If we caught young deer we brought them up to be pets for our children. And so it came about that as they grew up we found out that we could milk them into skins. But that gave it a smack, and whenever we desired a fresh draught there was nothing for it but to lie flat on the ground under a doe reindeer and suck for all we were worth. It was hard. Horses were hunted. It did not occur to us that they could be tamed and saddled and mounted. Oh! it was not right. It was not fair that you should have everything and we nothing—nothing—nothing! Why should you have all and we have had naught?"

"Because I belong to the twentieth century. Thirty-three generations go to a thousand years. There are some two hundred and sixty-four or two hundred and seventy generations intervening between you and me. Each generation makes some discovery that advances civilization a stage, the next enters on the discoveries of the preceding generations, and so culture advances stage by stage. Man is infinitely progressive, the brute beast is not."

"That is true," he replied. "I invented butter, which was unknown to my ancestors, the unbuttered man."

"Indeed!"

"It was so," he said, and I saw a flush of light ripple over the emanation.

I suppose it was a glow of self-satisfaction. "It came about thus. One of my wives had nearly let the fire out. I was very angry, and catching up one of the skins of milk, I banged her about the head with it till she fell insensible to the earth. The other wives were very pleased and applauded. When I came to take a drink, for my exertions had heated me, I found that the milk was curdled into butter. At first I did not know what it was, so I made one of my other wives taste it, and as she pronounced it to be good, I ate the rest myself. That was how butter was invented. For four hundred years that was the way it was made, by banging a milk-skin about the head of a woman till she was knocked down insensible. But at last a woman found out that by churning the milk with her hand butter could be made equally well, and then the former process was discontinued except by some men who dung to ancestral customs."

"But," said I, "nowadays you would not be suffered to knock your wife about, even with a milk-skin."

"Why not?"

"Because it is barbarous. You would be sent to gaol."

"But she was my wife."

"Nevertheless it would not be tolerated. The law steps in and protects women from ill-usage."

"How shameful! Not allowed to do what you like with your own wife!"

“Most assuredly not. Then you remarked that this was how you dealt with one of your wives. How many did you possess?”

“Off and on, seventeen.”

“Now, no man is suffered to have more than one.”

“What—one at a time?”

“Yes,” I replied.

“Ah, well. Then if you had an old and ugly wife, or one who was a scold, you could not kill her and get another, young and pretty.”

“That would not be allowed.”

“Not even if she were a scold?”

“No, you would have to put up with her to the bitter end.”

“Humph!” H.P. remained silent for a while wrapped in thought. Presently he said: “There is one thing I do not understand. In the wine-shop overhead the men get very quarrelsome, others drunk, but they never kill one another.”

“No. If one man killed another he would have his head cut off—here in France—unless extenuating circumstances were found. With us in England he would be hanged by the neck till he was dead.”

“Then—what is your sport?”

“We hunt the fox.”

“The fox is bad eating. I never could stomach it. If I did kill a fox I made my wives eat it, and had some mammoth meat for myself. But hunting is business with us—or was so—not sport”

“Nevertheless with us it is our great sport.”

“Business is business and sport is sport,” he said. “Now, we hunted as business, and had little fights and killed one another as our sport.”

“We are not suffered to kill one another.”

“But take the case,” said he, “that a man has a nose-ring, or a pretty wife, and you want one or the other. Surely you might kill him and possess yourself of what you so ardently covet?”

“By no means. Now, to change the topic,” I went on, “you are totally destitute of clothing. You do not even wear the traditional garment of fig leaves.”

“What avail fig leaves? There is no warmth in them.”

“Perhaps not—but one of delicacy.”

“What is that? I don’t understand.” There was clearly no corresponding sensation in the vibrating tympanum of his psychic nature.

“Did you never wear clothes?” I inquired.

“Certainly, when it was cold we wore skins, skins of the beasts we killed. But in summer what is the use of clothing? Besides, we only wore them out of doors. When we entered our homes, made of skins hitched up to the rock overhead, we threw them off. It was hot within, and we perspired freely.”

“What, were naked in your homes! you and your wives?”

“Of course we were. Why not? It was very warm within with the fire always kept up.”

“Why—good gracious me!” I exclaimed, “that would never be tolerated nowadays. If you attempted to go about the country unclothed, even get out of your clothes freely at home, you would be sent to a lunatic asylum, and kept there.”

“Humph!” He again lapsed into silence.

Presently he exclaimed: “After all, I think that we were better off as we were eight thousand years ago, even without your matches, Benedictine, education, *chocolat menier*, and

commercials, for then we were able to enjoy real sport—we could kill one another, we could knock old wives on the head, we could have a dozen or more squaws according to our circumstances, young and pretty, and we could career about the country or sit and enjoy a social chat at home, stark naked. We were best off as we were. There are compensations in life at every period of man. *Viva la liberté!*”

At that moment I heard a shout—saw a flash of light The workmen had pierced the barrier. A rush of fresh air entered. I staggered to my feet.

“*O! mon Dieu Monsieur vit encore!*”

I felt dizzy. Kind hands grasped me. I was dragged forth. Brandy was poured down my throat When I came to myself I gasped: “Fill in the hole! Fill it all up. Let H.P. lie where he is. He shall not go to the British Museum. I have had enough of prehistoric antiquities. *Adieu, pour toujours la Vézère.*”