

The Merewigs

By S. Baring-Gould

During the time that I lived in Essex, I had the pleasure of knowing Major Donnelly, retired on half-pay, who had spent many years in India; he was a man great powers of observation, and possessed an inexhaustible fund of information of the most valuable quality, which he was ready to communicate to his intimates, among whom was I.

Major Donnelly is now no more, and the world is thereby poorer. Major Donnelly took an interest in everything—anthropology, mechanics, archæology, physical science, natural history, the stock market, politics. In fact, it was not possible in conversation to broach a subject with which he was wholly unacquainted, and concerning which he was not desirous of acquiring further information. A man of this description is not to be held by lightly. I grappled him to my heart.

One day when we were taking a constitutional walk together, I casually mentioned the “Red Hills.” He had never heard of them, inquired, and I told him what little I knew on the matter. The Red Hills are mounds of burnt clay of a brick-red colour, found at intervals along the fringe of the marshes on the east coast. Of the date of their formation and the purpose they were destined to discharge, nothing has been certainly ascertained. Theories have been formed, and have been held to with tenacity, but these are unsupported by sound evidence. And yet, one would have supposed that these mysterious mounds would have been subjected to a careful scientific exploration to determine by the discovery of flint tools, potsherds, or coins to what epoch they belong, and that some clue should be discovered as to their purport. But at the time when I was in Essex, no such study had been attempted; whether any has been undertaken since I am unable to say.

I mentioned to Donnelly some of the suppositions offered as to the origin of these Red Hills; that they represented salt-making works, that they were funereal erections, that they were artificial bases for the huts of fishers.

“That is it,” said the major, “no doubt about it. To keep off the ague. Do you not know that burnt clay is a sure protection against ague, which was the curse of the Essex marsh land? In Central Africa, in the districts that lie low and there is morass, the natives are quite aware of the fact, and systematically form a bed of burnt clay as a platform on which to erect their hovels. Now look here, my dear friend, I’d most uncommonly like to take a boat along with you, and explore both sides of the Blackwater to begin with, and its inlets, and to tick down on the ordnance map every red hill we can find.”

“I am quite ready,” I replied. “There is one thing to remember. A vast number of these hills have been ploughed down, but you can certainly detect where they were by the colour of the soil.”

Accordingly, on the next fine day we engaged a boat—not a rower—for we could manage it between us, and started on our expedition.

The country around the Blackwater is flat, and the land slides into the sea and river with so slight an incline, that a good extent of debatable ground exists, which may be reckoned as belonging to both. Vast marshes are found occasionally flooded, covered with the wild lavender, and in June flushed with the seathrift. They nourish a coarse grass, and a bastard samphire. These marshes are threaded, cobweb fashion, by myriads of lines of water and mud that intercommunicate. Woe to the man who either stumbles into, or in jumping falls into, one of

these breaks in the surface of land. He sinks to his waist in mud. At certain times, when no high tides are expected, sheep are driven upon these marshes and thrive. They manage to leap the runnels, and the shepherd is aware when danger threatens, and they must be driven off.

Nearer the mainland are dykes thrown up, none know when, to reclaim certain tracts of soil, and on the land side are invariably stagnant ditches, where mosquitoes breed in myriads. Further up grow oak trees, and in summer to these the mosquitoes betake themselves in swarms, and may be seen in the evening swaying in such dense clouds above the trees that these latter seem to be on fire and smoking. Major Donnelly and I leisurely addled about, running into creeks, leaving our boat, identifying our position on the map, and marking in the position of such red hills or their traces as we lighted on.

Major Donnelly and I pretty well explored the left bank up to a certain point, when he proposed that we should push across to the other.

“I should advise doing thoroughly the upper reach of the Blackwater,” said he, “and we shall then have completed one section.”

“All right,” I responded, and we turned the boat’s head to cross. Unhappily, we had not calculated that the estuary was full of mudbanks. Moreover, the tide was ebbing, and before very long we grounded.

“Confound it!” said the major, “we are on a mudbank. What a fix we are in.”

We laboured with the oars to thrust off, but could touch no solid ground, to obtain purchase sufficient for our purpose.

Then said Donnelly: “The only thing to be done is for of us to step onto the bank and thrust the boat off. I do that. I have on an old shabby pair of trousers that matter.”

“No, indeed, you shall not. I will go,” and at the word I sprang overboard. But the major had jumped simultaneously, and simultaneously we sank in the horrible slime. It had the consistency of spinach. I do not mean such as English cooks send us to table, half-mashed and often gritty, but the spinach as served at a French table d’hôte, that has been pulped through a fine hair sieve. And what is more, it apparently had no bottom. For aught I know it might go down a mile in depth towards the centre of the globe, and it stank abominably. We both clung to the sides of the boat to save ourselves from sinking altogether.

There we were, one on each side, clinging to the bulwarks and looking at one another. For a moment or two neither spoke. Donnelly was the first to recover his presence of mind, and after wiping his mouth on the gunwale from the mud that had squirted over it, he said: “Can you get out?”

“Hardly,” said I.

We tugged at the boat, it squelched about, splashing the slime over us, till it plastered our heads and faces and covered our hands.

“This will never do,” said he. “We must get in together, and by instalments. Look here! when I say ‘three,’ throw in your left leg if you can get it out of the mud.”

“I will do my best.”

And he said further, “we must do so both at the same moment. Now, don’t be a sneak and try to get in your body whilst I am putting in my leg, or you will upset the boat.”

“I never was a sneak,” I retorted angrily, “and I certainly will not be one in what may be the throes of death.”

“All right,” said the major. “One—two—three!”

Instantly both of us drew our left legs out of the mud, and projected them over the sides into the boat.

“How are you?” asked he. “Got your leg in all right?”

“All but my boot,” I replied, “and that has been sucked off my foot.”

“Oh, bother the boot,” said the major, “so long as your leg is safe within, and has not been sucked off. That would have disturbed the equipoise. Now then—next we must have our trunks and right legs within. Take a long breath, and wait till I call ‘three.’ ”

We paused, panting with the strain; then Donnelly, in a stentorian voice, shouted: “One—two—three!”

Instantly we writhed and strained, and finally, after a convulsive effort, both were landed in the bottom of the boat. We picked ourselves up and seated ourselves, each on one bulwark, looking at one another.

We were covered with the foul slime from head to foot, our clothes were caked, so were our hands and faces. But we were secure.

“Here,” said Donnelly, “we shall have to remain for six hours till the tide flows, and the boat is lifted. It is of no earthly use for us to shout for help. Even if our calls were heard, no one could come out to us. Here, then, we stick and must make the best of it. Happily the sun is hot, and will cake the mud about us, and then we can pick off some of it.”

The prospect was not inviting. But I saw no means of escape.

Presently Donnelly said: “It is good that we brought our luncheon with us, and above all some whisky, which is the staff of life. Look here, my dear fellow. I wish it were possible to get this stinking stuff off our hands and faces; it smells like the scouring poured down the sink in Satan’s own back kitchen. Is there not a bottle of claret in the basket?”

“Yes, I put one in.”

“Then,” said he, “the best use we can put it to is to wash our faces and hands in it. Claret is poor drink, and there is the whisky to fall back on.”

“The water has all ebbed away,” I remarked. “We cannot clean ourselves in that.”

“Then uncork the *Saint Julien*.”

There was really no help for it. The smell of the mud was disgusting, and it turned one’s stomach. So I pulled out the cork, and we performed our ablutions in the claret.

That done, we returned to our seats on the gunwale, one on each side, and looked sadly at one another. Six hours! That was an interminable time to spend on a mudflat in the Blackwater. Neither of us was much inclined to speak. After the lapse of a quarter of an hour, the major proposed refreshments. Accordingly we crept together into the bottom of the boat and there discussed the contents of the hamper, and we certainly did full justice to the whisky bottle. For we were wet to the skin, and beplastered from head to foot in the ill-savoured mud.

When we had done the chicken and ham, and drained the whisky jar, we returned to our several positions *vis-à-vis*. It was essential that the balance of the boat should be maintained.

Major Donnelly was now in a communicative mood.

“I will say this,” observed he; “that you are the best-informed and most agreeable man I have met with in Colchester and Chelmsford.”

I would not record this remark but for what it led up to.

I replied—I dare say I blushed—but the claret in my face made it red, anyhow. I replied: “You flatter me.”

“Not at all. I always say what I think. You have plenty of information, and you’ll grow your wings, and put on rainbow colours.”

“What on earth do you mean?” I inquired.

“Do you not know,” said he, “that we shall all of us, some day, develop wings? Grow into angels! What do you suppose that ethereal pinions spring out of? They do not develop out of nothing. Ex nihilo nihil fit. You cannot think that they are the ultimate produce of ham and chicken.”

“Nor of whisky.”

“Nor of whisky,” he repeated. “You know it is so with the grub.”

“Grub is ambiguous,” I observed.

“I do not mean victuals, but the caterpillar. That creature spends its short life in eating, eating, eating. Look at a cabbage-leaf it is riddled with holes; the grub has consumed all that vegetable matter, and I will inform you for what purpose. It retires into its chrysalis, and during the winter a transformation takes place, and in spring it breaks forth as a glorious butterfly. The painted wings of the insect in its second stage of existence are the sublimated cabbage it has devoured in its condition of larva.”

“Quite so. What has that to do with me?”

“We are also in our larva condition. But do not for a moment suppose that the wings we shall put on with rainbow painting are the produce of what we eat here—of ham and chicken, kidneys, beef, and the like. No, sir, certainly not. They are fashioned out of the information we have absorbed, the knowledge we have acquired during the first stage of life.”

“How do you know that?”

“I will tell you,” he answered. “I had a remarkable experience once. It is a rather long story, but as we have some five hours and a half to sit here looking at one another till the tide rises and floats us, I may as well tell you, and it will help to the laying on of the colours on your pinions when you acquire them. You would like to hear the tale?”

“Above all things.”

“There is a sort of prologue to it,” he went on. “I cannot well dispense with it as it leads up to what I particularly want to say.”

“By all means let me have the prologue, if it be instructive.”

“It is eminently instructive,” he said. “But before I begin, just pass me the bottle, if there is any whisky left.”

“It is drained,” I said.

“Well, well, it can’t be helped. When I was in India, I moved from one place to another, and I had pitched my tent in a certain spot. I had a native servant. I forget what his real name was, and it does not matter. I always called him Alec. He was a curious fellow, and the other servants stood in awe of him. They thought that he saw ghosts and had familiar dealings with the spiritual world. He was honest as natives go. He would not allow anyone else to rob me; but, of course, he filched things of mine himself. We are accustomed to that, and think nothing of it. But it was a satisfaction that he kept the fingers of the others off my property. Well, one night, when, as I have informed you, my tent was pitched on a spot I considered eminently convenient, I slept very uncomfortably. It was as though a centipede were crawling over me. Next morning I spoke to Alec, and told him my experiences, and bade him search well my mattress and the floor of my tent. A Hindu’s face is impassive, but I thought I detected in his eyes a twinkle of understanding. Nevertheless I did not give it much thought. Next night it was as bad, and in the morning I found my panjams slit from head to foot. I called Alec to me and held up the garment, and said how uncomfortable I had been. ‘Ah! sahib,’ said he, ‘that is the doings of Abdulhamid, the blood-thirsty scoundrel!’ ”

“Excuse me,” I interrupted. “Did he mean the present Sultan of Turkey?”

“No, quite another, of the same name.”

“I beg your pardon,” I said. “But when you mentioned him as a bloodthirsty scoundrel, I supposed it must be he.”

“It was not he. It was another. Call him, if you like, the other Abdul. But to proceed with my story.”

“One inquiry more,” said I. “Surely Abdulhamid cannot be a Hindu name?”

“I did not say that it was,” retorted the major with a touch of asperity in his tone. “He was doubtless a Mohammedan.”

“But the name is rather Turkish or Arabic.”

“I am not responsible for that; I was not his godfathers and godmothers at his baptism. I am merely repeating what Alec told me. If you are so captious, I shall shut up and relate no more.”

“Do not take umbrage,” said I. “I surely have a right to test the quality of the material I take in, out of which my wings are to be evolved. Go ahead; I will interrupt no further.”

“Very well, then, let that be understood between us. Are you caking?”

“Slowly,” I replied. “The sun is hot; I am drying up on one side of my body.”

“I think that we had best shift sides of the boat,” said the major. “It is the same with me.”

Accordingly, with caution, we crossed over, and each took the seat on the gunwale lately occupied by the other.

“There,” said Donnelly. “How goes the enemy? My watch got smothered in the mud, and has stopped.”

“Mine,” I explained, “is plastered into my waistcoat pocket, and I cannot get at it without messing my fingers, and there is no more claret left for a wash; the whisky is all inside us.”

“Well,” said the major, “it does not matter; there is plenty of time before us for the rest of my story. Let me see—where was I? Oh! where Alec mentioned Abdulhamid, the inferior scoundrel, not the Sultan. Alec went on to say that he was himself possessed of a remarkably keen scent for blood, even though it had been shed a century before his time, and that my tent had been pitched and my bed spread over a spot marked by a most atrocious crime. That Abdul of whom he had made mention had been a man steeped in crimes of the most atrocious character. Of course, he did not come up in wickedness to his illustrious namesake, but that was because he lacked the opportunities with which the other is so favoured. On the very identical spot where I then was, this same bloodstained villain had perpetrated his worst iniquity—he had murdered his father and mother, and aunt, and his children. After that he was taken and hanged. When his soul parted from his body, in the ordinary course it would have entered into the shell of a scorpion or some other noxious creature, and so have mounted through the scale of beings, by one incarnation after another, till he attained once more to the high estate of man.”

“Excuse the interruption,” said I, “but I think you intimated that this Abdulhamid was a Mohammedan, and the sons of the Prophet do not believe in the transmigration of souls.”

“That,” said Donnelly, “is precisely the objection I raised to Alec. But he told me that souls after death are not accommodated with a future according to the creeds they hold, but according to Destiny: that whatever a man might suppose during life as to the condition of his future state, there was but one truth to which they would all have their eyes opened—the truth held by the Hindus, viz, the transmigration of souls from stage to stage, ever progressing upward to man, and then to recommence the interminable circle of reincarnation. ‘So,’ said I, ‘it was Abdul in the form of a scorpion who was tickling my ribs all night.’ ‘No, sahib,’ replied my native servant very gravely. He was too wicked to be suffered to set his foot, so to speak, on the lowest rung of the ladder of existences. The doom went forth against him that he must haunt the scenes of his

former crimes, till he found a man sleeping over one of them, and on that man must be a mole, and out of that mole must grow three hairs. These hairs he must pluck out and plant on the grave of his final victims, and water them with his tears. And the flowing of these first drops of penitence would enable him to pass at once into the first stage of the circle of incarnations.’ ‘Why,’ said I, ‘that unredeemed ruffian was mole-hunting over me the last two nights! But what do you say to these slit panjams?’ ‘Sahib,’ replied Alec, ‘he did that with his nails. I presume he turned you over, and ripped them so as to get at your back and feel for the so-much-desired mole.’ ‘I’ll have the tent shifted,’ said I. ‘Nothing will induce me to sleep another night on this accursed spot.’ ”

Donnelly paused, and proceeded to take off some flakes of mud that had formed on his sleeve. We really were beginning to get drier, but in drying we stiffened, as the mud became hard about us like pie-crust.

“So far,” said I, “we have had no wings.”

“I am coming to them,” replied the major; “I have now concluded the prologue.”

“Oh! that was the prologue, was it?”

“Yes. Have you anything against it? It was the prologue. Now I will go on with the main substance of my story. About a year after that incident I retired on half-pay, and returned to England. What became of Alec I did not know, nor care a hang. I had been in England for a little over two years, when one day I was walking along Great Russell Street, and passing the gates of the British Museum, I noticed a Hindu standing there, looking wretchedly cold and shabby. He had a tray containing bangles and necklaces and gewgaws, made in Germany, which he was selling as oriental works of art. As I passed, he saluted me, and, looking steadily at him, I recognised Alec. ‘Why, what brings you here?’ I inquired, vastly astonished. ‘Sahib may well ask,’ he replied. ‘I came over because I thought I might better my condition. I had heard speak of a Psychical Research Society established in London; and with my really extraordinary gifts, I thought that I might be of value to it, and be taken in and paid an annuity if I supplied it continuously with well-authenticated, first-hand ghost stories.’ ‘Well,’ said I, ‘and have you succeeded?’ ‘No, sahib. I cannot find it. I have inquired after it from several of the crossing-sweepers, and they could not inform me of its whereabouts; and if I applied to the police, they bade me take myself off, there was no such a thing. I should have starved, sahib, if it had not been that I had taken to this line’; he pointed to his tray. ‘Does that pay well?’ I asked. He shook his head sadly. ‘Very poorly. I can live—that is all. There goes in a Merewig.’ ‘How many of these rubbishy bangles can you dispose of in a day?’ I inquired. ‘That depends, sahib. It varies so greatly, and the profits are very small. So small that I can barely get along. There goes in another Merewig.’ ‘Where are all these things made?’ I asked. ‘In Germany or in Birmingham?’ ‘Oh, sahib, how can I tell? I get them from a Jew dealer. He supplies various street-hawkers. But I shall give it up—it does not pay—and shall set up a stall and dispose of Turkish Delight. There is always a run on that. You English have a sweet tooth. That’s a Merewig,’ and he pointed to a dowdy female, with a reticule on her arm, who, at that moment, went through the painted iron gates. ‘What do you mean by Merewigs?’ said I. ‘Does not sahib know?’ Alec’s face expressed genuine surprise. ‘If sahib will go into the great reading-room, he will see scores of them there. It is their great London haunt; they pass in all day, mainly in the morning—some are in very early, so on as the museum is open at nine o’clock. And they usually remain there all day picking up information, acquiring knowledge.’ ‘You mean the students?’ ‘Not all the students, but a large percentage of them. I know them in a moment. Sahib is aware that I have great gifts for the discernment of spirits.’

“By the way,” broke off Donnelly, “do you understand Hindustani?”

“Not a word of it,” I replied.

“I am sorry for that,” said he, “because I could tell you that what passed between us so much easier in Hindustani. I am able to speak and understand it as readily as English, and the matter I am going to relate would come off my tongue so much easier in that language.”

“You might as well speak it in Chinese. I should be none the wiser. Wait a moment. I am cracking.”

It was so. The heat of the sun was sensibly affecting my crust of mud. I think I must have resembled a fine old painting, the varnish of which is stained and traversed by an infinity of minute fissures, a perfect network of cracks. I stood up and stretched myself, and split in several places. Moreover, portions of my muddy envelope began to curl at the edges.

“Don’t be in too great a hurry to peel,” advised Donnelly. “We have abundance of time still before us, and I want to proceed with my narrative.”

“Go on, then. When are we coming to the wings?”

“Directly,” replied he. “Well, then — if you cannot perceive what I have to say in Hindustani, I must do my best to give you the substance of Alec’s communication in the vulgar tongue. I will epitomise it. The Hindu went on to explain in this fashion. He informed me that with us, Christians and white people, it is not the same as with the dusky and the yellow races. After death we do not pass into the bodies of the lower animals, which is a great privilege and ought to afford us immense satisfaction. We at once progress into a higher condition of life. We develop wings, as does the butterfly when it emerges from its condition of grub. But the matter out of which the wings are produced is nothing gross. They are formed, or form themselves, out of the information with which we have filled our brains during life. We lay up, during our mortal career here, a large amount of knowledge, of scientific, historical, philosophic, and like acquisitions, and these form the so-to-speak psychic pulp out of which, by an internal and mysterious and altogether inexplicable process, the transmutation takes place into our future wings. The more we have stored, the larger are our wings; the more varied the nature, the more radiant and coloured is their painting. When, at death, the brain is empty, there can be no wing-development. Out of nothing, nothing can arise. That is a law of nature absolutely inexorable in its application. And this is why you will never have to regret sticking in the mud to-day, my friend. I have supplied you with such an amount of fresh and valuable knowledge, that I believe you will have pinions painted hereafter with peacock’s eyes.”

“I am most obliged to you,” said I, splitting into a thousand cakes with the emotion that agitated me.

Donnelly proceeded. “I was so interested in what Alec told me, that I said to him, ‘Come along with me into the Nineveh room, and we shall be able to thrash this matter out.’ ‘Ah, sahib,’ he replied, ‘they will not allow me to take in my tray.’ ‘Very well,’ said I, ‘then we will find a step before the portico, one not too much frequented by the pigeons, and will sit there.’ He agreed. But the porter at the gate demurred to letting the Hindu through. He protested that no trafficking was allowed on the premises. I explained that none was purposed; that the man and I proposed a discussion on psychological topics. This seemed to content the porter, and he suffered Alec to pass through with me. We picked out as clean a portion of the steps as we could, and seated ourselves on it side by side, and then the Hindu went on with what he was saying.”

Donnelly and I were now drying rapidly. As we sat facing each other we must have looked very much like the chocolate men one sees in confectioners’ shops—of course, I mean on a much

larger scale, and not of the same warm tint, and, of course, also, we did not exhale the same aromatic odour.

“When we were seated,” proceeded Donnelly, “I felt the cold of the stone steps strike up into my system, and as I have had a touch or two of lumbago since I came home, I stood up again, took a copy of the *Standard* out of my pocket, folded it, and placed it between myself and the step. I did, however, pull out the inner leaf, that containing the leaders, and presented it to Alec for the same purpose. Orientals are insensible to kindness, and are deficient in the virtue of gratitude. But this delicate trait of attention did touch the benighted heathen. His lip quivered, and he became, if possible, more than ever communicative. He nudged me with his tray and said, ‘There goes out a Merewig. I wonder why she leaves so soon?’ I saw a middle-aged woman in a gown of grey, with greasy splotches on it, and the braid unsewn at the skirt trailing in a loop behind. ‘What are the Merewigs?’ I asked. I will give you what I learned in my own words. All men and women—I allude only to Europeans and Americans—in the first stage of their life are bound morally, and in their own interest, to acquire and store up in their brains as much information as these will hold, for it is out of this that their wings will be evolved in their second stage of existence. Of course, the more varied this information is, the better. Men inevitably accumulate knowledge. Even if they assimilate very little at school, yet, as young men, they necessarily take in a good deal—of course, I exempt the mashers, who never learn anything. Even in sport they obtain something; but in business, by reading, by association, by travel, they go on piling up a store. You see that in common conversation they cannot escape doing this; politics, social questions, points of natural history, scientific discoveries form the staple of their talk, so that the mind of a man is necessarily kept replenished. But with women this is not the case. Young girls read nothing whatever but novels—they might as well feed on soap-bubbles. In their conversation with one another they twaddle, they do not talk.”

“But,” protested I, “in our civilised society young women associate freely with men.”

“That is true,” replied he. “But to what is their dialogue limited?—to ragging, to frivolous jokes. Men do not talk to them on rational topics, for they know well enough that such topics do not interest girls, and that they are wholly incapable of applying their minds to them. It is wondered why so many Englishmen look out for American wives. That is because the American girl takes pains to cultivate her mind, becomes a rational and well-educated woman. She can enter into her husband’s interests, she can converse with him on almost every topic. She becomes his companion. That the modern English girl cannot be. Her head is as hollow as a drum. Now, if she grows up and marries, or even remains an old maid, the case is altered; she takes to keeping poultry, she becomes passionately fond of gardening, and she acquires a fund of information on the habits and customs of the domestic servant. The consequence of this is, that the vast majority of English young women who die early, die with nothing stored up in their brains out of which the wings may be evolved. In the larva condition they have consumed nothing that can serve them to bring them into the higher state.”

“So,” said I, “we are all, you and I, in the larva condition as well as girls.”

“Quite so, we are larvæ like them, only they are more so. To proceed. When girls die, without having acquired any profitable knowledge, as you well see, they cannot rise. They become Merewigs.”

“Oh, that is Merewigs,” said I, greatly astonished.

“Yes, but the Merewigs I had seen pass in and out of the British Museum, whether to study the collections or to work in the reading-room, were middle-aged for the most part.”

How do you explain that?” I asked.

“I give you only what I received from Alec. There are male Merewigs, but they are few and far between, for the reasons I have given to you. I suppose there are ninety-nine female Merewigs to one male.”

“You astonish me.”

“I was astonished when I learned this from Alec. Now

“I will tell you something further. All the souls of the girls who have died empty-headed in the preceding twenty-four hours in England assemble at four o’clock every morning, or rather a few minutes before the stroke of the clock, about the statue of Queen Anne in front of St. Paul’s Cathedral, with a possible sprinkling of male masher souls among them. At the stroke of the clock, off the whole swarm rushes up Holborn Hill, along Oxford Street, whither I cannot certainly say. Alec told me that it is for all the world like the rush of an army of rats in the sewers.”

“But what can that Hindu know of underground London?”

“He knows because he lodges in the house of a sewer-man, with whom he has become on friendly terms.”

“Then you do not know whither this galloping legion runs?”

“Not exactly, for Alec was not sure. But he tells me they tear away to the great *garde-robe* of discarded female bodies. They must get into these, so as to make up for the past, and acquire knowledge, out of which wings may be developed. Of course there is a scramble for these bodies, for there are at least half a dozen applicants. At first only the abandoned husks of old maids were given them, but the supply having proved to be altogether inadequate, they are obliged to put up with those of married women and widows. There was some demur as to this, but beggars must not be choosers. And so they become Merewigs. There are more than a sufficiency of old bachelors’ outer cases hanging up in the *garde-robe*, but the girls will not get into them at any price. Now you understand what Merewigs are, and why they swarm in the reading-room of the British Museum. They are there picking up information as hard as they can pick.”

“This is extremely interesting,” said I, “and novel.”

“I thought you would say so. How goes on the drying?”

“I have been picking off clots of clay while you have been talking.”

“I hope you are interested,” said Donnelly.

“Interested,” I replied, “is not the word for it.”

“I am glad you think so,” said the major; “I was intensely interested in what Alec told me, so much so that I proposed he should come with me into the reading-room and point out to me such as he perceived by his remarkable gift of discernment of spirits were actual Merewigs. But again the difficulty of his tray was objected, and Alec further intimated that he was missing opportunities of disposing of his trinkets by spending so much time conversing with me. ‘As to that,’ said I, ‘I will buy half a dozen of your bangles and present them to my lady friends; as coming from me, an oriental traveller, they will believe them to be genuine—’ ”

“As your experiences,” interpolated I.

What do you mean by that?” he inquired sharply.

“Nothing more than this,” rejoined I, “that faith is grown weak among females nowadays.”

“That is certainly true. It is becoming a sadly incredulous sex. I further got over Alec’s difficulty about the tray by saying that it could be left in the custody of one of the officials at the entrance. Then he consented. We passed through the swing-door and deposited the tray with the functionary who presides over umbrellas and walking-sticks. Then I went forward along with my Hindu towards the reading-room. But here another hindrance arose. Alec had no ticket, and

therefore might not enter beyond the glass screen interposed between the door and the readers. Some demur was made as to his being allowed to remain there for any considerable time, but I got over that by means of a little persuasion. 'Sahib,' said Alec, 'I should suggest your marking the Merewigs, so as to be able to recognise them elsewhere.' 'How can I do that?' I inquired. 'I have here with me a piece of French chalk,' he answered. 'You go within, sahib, and walk up and down by the tables, behind the chairs of the readers, or around the circular cases that contain the catalogues, and where the students are looking out for the books they desire to consult. When you pass a female, either seated or standing, glance towards the glass screen, and when you are by a Merewig I will hold up my hand above the screen, and you will know her to be one; then just scrawl a W or M, or any letter or cabalistic symbol that occurs to you, upon her back with the French chalk. Then whenever you meet her in the street, in society, at an A. B. C. place of refreshment, on a railway platform, you will recognise her infallibly.' 'Not likely,' I objected. 'Of course, so soon as she gets home, she will brush off the mark.' 'You do not know much of the Merewigs,' he said. 'When the spirits of those frivolous girls were in their first stage of existence, they were most particular about their personal appearance, about the neatness and stylishness of their dress, and the puffing and piling up of their hair. Now all that is changed. They are so disgusted at having to get into any unsouled body that they can lay hold of in the *garde-robe*, such a body being usually plain in features, middle-aged, and with no waist to speak of, or rather too ample in the waist to be elegant, that they have abandoned all concern about dress and tidiness. Besides, they are engrossed in the acquisition of knowledge, and the burning desire that consumes them is to get out of these borrowed cases as speedily as may be. Consequently, so long as they are dressed and their hair done up anyhow, that is all they care about. As to threads, or feathers, or French chalk marks on their clothes, they would not think of looking for them.' Then Alec handed to me a little piece of French chalk, such as tailors and dressmakers employ to indicate alterations when fitting on garments. So provided, I passed wholly into the spacious reading-room, leaving the Hindu behind the screen.

"I slowly strayed down the first line of desks and chairs, which were fully engaged. There were many men there, with piles of books at their sides. There were also some women. I stepped behind one, and turned my head towards the screen, but Alec made no sign. At the second, however, up went his hand above it, and I hastily scrawled M, on her back as she stooped over her studies. I had time, moreover, to see what she was engaged upon. She was working up deep-sea soundings, beginning with that recorded by Schiller in his ballad of 'The Diver,' down to the last scientific researches in the bottom of the Atlantic and the Pacific, and the dredgings in the North Sea. She was engrossed in her work, and was picking up facts at a prodigious rate. She was a woman of, I should say, forty, with a cadaverous face, a shapeless nose, and enormous hands. Her dress was grey, badly fitted, and her boots were even worse made. Her hair was drawn back and knotted in a bunch behind, with the pins sticking out. It might have been better brushed. I passed on behind her back; the next occupants of seats were gentlemen, so I stepped to another row of desks, and looking round saw Alec's hand go up. I was behind a young lady in a felt hat, crunched in at top, and with a feather at the side; she wore a pea-jacket, with large smoked buttons, and beneath it a dull green gown, very short in the skirt, and brown boots. Her hair was cut short like that of a man. As I halted, she looked round, and I saw that she had hard, brown eyes, like pebbles, without a gleam of tenderness or sympathy in them. I cannot say whether this was due to the body she had assumed, or to the soul which had entered into the body—whether the lack was in the organ, or in the psychic force which employed the organ. I merely state the fact. I looked over her shoulder to see what she was engaged upon, and found

that she was working her way diligently through Herbert Spencer. I scored a W on her back and went on. The next Merewig I had to scribble on was a wizen old lady, with little grey curls on the temples, very shabby in dress, and very antiquated in costume. Her fingers were dirty with ink, and the ink did not appear to me to be all of that day's application. Besides, I saw that she had been rubbing her nose. I presume it had been tickling, and she had done this with a finger still wet with ink, so that there was a smear on her face. She was engaged on the peerage. She had Dod, Burke, and Foster before her, and was getting up the authentic pedigrees of our noble families and their ramifications. I noticed with her as with the other Merewigs, that when they had swallowed a certain amount of information they held up their heads much like fowls after drinking.

"The next that I marked was a very thin woman of an age I was quite unable to determine. She had a pointed nose, and was dressed in red. She looked like a stick of sealing-wax. The gown had probably enough been good and showy at one time, but it was ripped behind now, and the stitches showed, besides, a little bit of what was beneath. There was a frilling, or ruche, or tucker, about the throat that I think had been sewn into it three weeks before. I drew a note of interrogation on her back with my bit of French chalk. I wanted much to find out what she was studying, but could not. She turned round and asked sharply what I was stooping over for and breathing on the back of her neck. So I was forced to go on to the next. This was a lady fairly well dressed in the dingiest of colours, wearing spectacles. I believe that she wore divided skirts, but as she did not stand up and walk, I cannot be certain. I am particular never to make a statement of which I am not absolutely certain. She was engaged upon the subject of the land laws in various countries, on common land, and property in land; and she was at that time devoting her special attention to the constitution of the Russian *mir* and the tenure of land under it. I scrawled on her back the zodiacal sign for Venus, the Virgin, and went further. But when I had marked seventeen I gave it up. I had already gone over the desks to L, beginning backward, and that sufficed, so I returned to Alec, paid him for the bangles, and we separated. I did, however, give him a letter to the Secretary of the Psychical Research Society, and addressed it, having found what I wanted in the *London Directory*, which was in the reading-room of the British Museum. Two days later I met, by appointment, my Hindu once more, and for the last time. He had not been received as he had anticipated by the Psychical Research Society, and thought of getting back to India at the first opportunity.

"It is remarkable that, a few days later, I saw in the Underground one of those I had marked. The chalk mark was still quite distinct. She was not in my compartment, but I noticed her as she stepped out on to the platform at Baker Street. I suspect she was on her way to Madame Tussaud's waxwork exhibition, to instruct her mind there. But I was more fortunate a week later when I was at St. Albans. I had an uncle living there from whom I had expectations, and I paid him a visit. Whilst 'there, a lecture was to be given on the spectroscope, and as my acquaintance with that remarkable invention of modern times was limited, I resolved to go. Have you, my friend, ever taken up the subject of the photosphere of the sun?"

"Never."

"Then let me press it upon you. It will really supply a large amount of wing-pulp, if properly assimilated. It is a most astonishing thought that we are able, at the remote distance at which we are from the solar orb, to detect the various incandescent metals which go to make up the luminous envelope of the sun. Not only so, but we are able to discover, by the bars in the spectroscope, of what Jupiter, Saturn, and so on are composed. What a stride astronomy has made since the days of Newton!"

“No doubt about it. But I do not want to hear about the bars, but of the chalk marks on the Merewigs.”

“Well, then, I noticed two elderly ladies sitting in the row before me, and there—as distinctly as if sketched in only yesterday—were the symbols I had scribbled on their backs. I did not have an opportunity of speaking with them then; indeed, I had no introduction to them, and could hardly take on me to address them without it. I was, however, more successful a week or two later. There was a meeting of the Hertfordshire Archaeological Society organised, to last a week, with excursions to ancient Verulam and to other objects of interest in the county. Hertfordshire is not a large county. It is, in fact, one of the smallest in England, but it yields to none in the points of interest that it contains, apart from the venerable abbey church that has been so fearfully mauled and maltreated by ignorant so-called restoration. One must really hope that the next generation, which will be more enlightened than our own, will undo all the villainous work that has been perpetrated to disfigure it in our own. The local secretaries and managers had arranged for char-à-bancs and brakes to take the party about, and men—learned, or thinking themselves to be learned, on the several antiquities—were to deliver lectures on the spot explanatory of what we saw. On three days there were to be evening gatherings, at which papers would be read. You may conceive that this was a supreme opportunity for storing the mind with information, and knowing what I did, I resolved on taking advantage of it. I entered my name as a subscriber to all the excursions. On the first day we went over the remains of the old Roman city of Verulam, and were shown its plan and walls, and further, the spot where the protomartyr of Britain passed over the stream, and the hill on which he was martyred. Nothing could have been more interesting and more instructive. Among those present were three middle-aged personages of the female sex, all of whom were chalk-marked on the back. One of these marks was somewhat effaced, as though the lady whose gown was scored had made a faint effort to brush it off, but had tired of the attempt and had abandoned it. The other two scorings were quite distinct.

“On this, the first day, though I sidled up to these three Merewigs, I did not succeed in ingratiating myself into their favour sufficiently to converse with them. You may well understand, my friend, that such an opportunity of getting out of them some of their Merewigian experiences was not to be allowed to slip. On the second day I was more successful. I managed to obtain a seat in a brake between two of them. We were to drive to a distant spot where was a church of considerable architectural interest.

“Well, in these excursions a sort of freemasonry exists between the archæologists who share in them, and no ceremonious introductions are needed. For instance, you say to the lady next to you, ‘Am I squeezing you?’ And the ice is broken. I did not, however, attempt to draw any information from those between whom I was seated, till after luncheon, a most sumptuous repast, with champagne, liberally given to the Society by a gentleman of property, to whose house we drove up just about one o’clock. There was plenty of champagne supplied, and I did not stint myself I felt it necessary to take in a certain amount of Dutch courage before broaching to my companions in the brake the theme that lay near my heart. When, however, we got into the conveyance, all in great spirits, after the conclusion of the lunch, I turned to my right-hand lady, and said to her: ‘Well, miss, I fear it will be a long time before you become angelic.’ She turned her back upon me and made no reply. Somewhat disconcerted, I now addressed myself to the chalk-marked lady on my left hand, and asked: ‘Have you anything at all in your head except archæology?’ Instead of answering me in the kindly mood in which I spoke, she began at once to enter into a lively discussion with her neighbour on the opposite side of the carriage, and ignored me. I was not to be done in this way. I wanted information. But, of course, I could enter into the

feelings of both. Merewigs do not like to converse about themselves in their former stage of existence, of which they are ashamed, nor of the efforts they are making in this transitional stage to acquire a fund of knowledge for the purpose of ultimately discarding their acquired bodies, and developing their ethereal wings as they pass into the higher and nobler condition.

“We left the carriage to go to a spot about a mile off, through lanes, muddy and ruddy, for the purpose of inspecting some remarkable stones. All the party would not walk, and the conveyances could proceed no nearer. The more enthusiastic did go on, and I was of the number. What further stimulated me to do so was the fact that the third Merewig, she who had partially cleaned my scoring off her back, plucked up her skirts, and strode ahead. I hurried after and caught her up. ‘I beg your pardon,’ said I. ‘You must excuse the interest I take in antiquities, but I suppose it is a long time since you were a girl.’ Of course, my meaning was obvious; I referred to her earlier existence, before she borrowed her present body. But she stopped abruptly, gave me a withering look, and went back to rejoin another group of pedestrians. Ha! my friend, I verily believe that the boat is being lifted. The tide is flowing in.”

“The tide is flowing,” I said; and then added, “really, Major Donnelly, your story ought not to be confined to the narrow circle of your intimates.”

“That is true,” he replied. “But my desire to make it known has been damped by the way in which Alec was received, or rather rejected, by the Secretary of the Society for Psychological Research.”

“But I do not mean that you should tell it to the Society for Psychological Research.”

“To whom, then?”

“Tell it to the Horse Marines.”