

GERM HUNTING IN MEHALALAND

By F. Carruthers Gould

There are some works of fiction so strong in what we call "local colour" that they throw back on to the nature which forms the background of the pictures a reflected light, more intense even than the original.

They are like concentrated essences, the distilled scent more potent than the perfume of the flowers themselves.

Of such fictions there are many examples. In Thomas Hardy's Woodlanders we can smell the bark and the resinous fragrance of freshly-cut timber; Blackmore's Lorna Doone is even a stronger example of my meaning. It is Exmoor itself, more Exmoor even than the moor where the scene of the story is laid.

And so that country has come to be known as the Lorna Doone country; the coach that runs from Minehead to Lynton is the Lorna Doone coach, and if you converse with a native, the chances are many that he will ask: "Hav'ee read Lorna Doone beuk?"

But when the literary germ hunter finds his way to the Doone Valley, he feels aggrieved and disappointed.

The waterslide is insignificant, and the hills on either side of the stream, instead of being precipitous walls, slope gently up.

But so powerful is the fascination of fiction, that the visitor, instead of blaming the author for exaggeration, feels inclined to find fault with the reality around him.

Now, if Lorna Doone be the fiction prose-poem of Devon and Somerset, we, may claim that Baring-Gould's Mehalah stands in the same relation to Essex.

But there is this difference, that the Essex germ hunter will feel no sense of disproportion between romance and reality. Every touch is true to the nature, the spirit of which breathes through every page of the grim, powerful story of Elijah Rebow and Mehalah Sharland. Literary germ hunting is a fascinating pursuit, and profitable to the mind, if it be done in the right way. Many years ago a certain Herr Von Joel catered for the amusement of cockneys in some public pleasure gardens in London, by imitating the song of the nightingale, and Punch had a caricature of one of these cockneys in a country garden, listening to the song of Philomel, to which his host has drawn his attention, and the visitor remarks, with evident delight, that "It's exactly like Herr Von Joel!"

So, having this *reductio ad absurdum* as a beacon to warn me off the mud, when I sailed down the Blackwater river with a goodly company of merry Maldon and cheerful Chelmsford men, I cast behind me, as if it were a tempter, the idea of making Facts fit too closely into Fiction.

I knew that there would be saltings and marshes and oozy mud banks, veined with shining arteries of creeks and channels and fleets. Am I knew that I should see men rowing in punts, and that the men would bear the names of Musset, De Witt, and Pettican, and that somewhere and somehow I should hear of a real Mehalah.

But what I wanted was to catch the strains of the music, the motif that plaintive ever-recurring theme, in a minor key, of the persistent wailing pipe of the redshanks, the children of the marshlands, the weird whistling of the curlew, the querulous cries of the gulls, and the harsh "crank" of the heron. And we have not to listen long before our ears are attuned to the melody.

Our boat lies at anchor in Mersea quarters, the channel to the west of the island, with the long lonely stretch of the Middle Island on one side, and on the other, across an intervening mudbank, are a few lights twinkling on Mersea Hard.

And when we stand on the deck under the starlit sky, and listen to the wild mournful plaints of the restless feathered folk echoing across the great waste of marshes and saltings, the only sounds, besides the soft lapping of the tide, that break the stillness of the night, we feel that the soul of a soulful man who lives here amidst these solitudes must, like an Aeolian harp, throb to the pulsing of the very air.

This is how Baring-Gould paints the background against which the two central figures in his tragedy, Mehalah and Elijah Rebow, stand out with such fierce intensity:

A more desolate region can scarce be conceived, and yet it is not without beauty.

In summer the thrift mantles the marshes with shot satin, passing through all gradations of tint from maiden's blush to lily white. Thereafter a purple glow steals over the waste, as the sea lavender bursts into flower, and simultaneously every creek and pool is royally fringed with sea aster.

A little later the glass-wort, that shot up green and transparent as emerald glass in the early spring, turns to every tinge of carmine.

When all vegetation ceases to live, and goes to sleep, the marshes are alive and wakeful with countless wild fowl. At all times they are haunted with sea-mews and royston crows, in winter they teem with wild duck and grey geese.

The stately heron loves to wade in the pools, occasionally the whooper swan sounds his loud trumpet, and flashes a white reflection in the still blue waters of the fleets. The plaintive pipe of the curlew is familiar to those who frequent the marshes, and the barking of the brent geese as they return from their Northern breeding places is heard in November.

No-one who knows and loves these great wide marshlands can fail to detect and to appreciate the wonderful harmony that exists between the voices and the haunts of birds.

There is harmony in the nightingale's song as it trills out from the shadows of the woodland sleeping in the moonlight, and there is the like harmony in the peevish, puling cry of the peewit, and the mournful notes of the redshank or the curlew, as they flit over the great solitudes.

And so in Mehalah it is the voices of the whimbrel that sound the weird chorus of coming tragedy. Mehalah was with her lover, George De Witt.

The wind had risen, and was wailing over the marshes, sighing among the harsh herbage, the sea lavender, sovereign wood, and wild asparagus. Not a cloud was visible. The sky was absolutely unblurred and thick besprinkled with stars. Jupiter burned in the south, and cast a streak of silver over the ebbing waters.

Hark!

Out of the clear heaven was heard plaintive whistles, loud, high up, inexpressibly weird and sad. "Ewe! Ewe! Ewe!" They burst shrilly on the ears, then became fainter, then burst forth again, then faded away. It was as though spirits were passing in the heavens, wailing about a brother sprite that had flickered into nothingness.

"The curlew are in flight. What is the matter, Mehalah?" The girl was shivering.

"Are you cold?"

"George, those are the Seven Whistlers. They are the long-beaked curlew going south."

"They are the Seven Whistlers, and they mean death or death-like woe."

Again, towards the end of the story, how beautifully the girl's craving for escape from Elijah's thralldom is symbolised by the pitiful struggles of the sea-gull, whose wing the tyrant had wantonly maimed as he had broken Mehalah's heart in striving to break her will, as the wounded bird flapped and edged its painful way to the salt sea.

In that great light went out also, on the same cold, dark water, the dying bird, that now stirred not a wing.

The opening scene of Mehalah is laid on the Ray, a raised beach of gravel lying on the middle island, and standing out above the level of the highest tides. It is crowned with thorn-trees, and gorse bushes are scattered about, and it was here that the heroine lived with her mother in "a small farmhouse built of tarred wreckage timber, and roofed with red pan-tiles."

There is no vestige of a dwelling-place here now - but that matters little to a germ-hunter; for did not Elijah Rebow burn it to the ground? For, said he:

"The Ray is mine; I have bought it with my own money - eight hundred pounds. I could stubb up the trees if I would; I could cart muck into the well and choke it if I would; I could pull down the stables and break them up for firewood if I chose. All here is mine - the Ray, the marshes and the saltings, the creeks, the fleets, the farm."

The central plot of Mehalah is one that the author has always found attractive: the struggle between two strong wills - one strong for good, the other for evil - warring against each other for the mastery. And it is this grim duel between Mehalah Sharland and Elijah Rebow that is the main thread of the story. For the girl herself we need not search for any germ.

The name Mehalah is not uncommon in the district, and there is one who, so her father says, is really the original of the character. But, so far from being drowned tragically, this Mehalah married a marine, and still lives. So we will take it that the heroine is a creation of fiction, but embodying the pure, healthy independence of her mode of life and her surroundings, and the individuality which solitude will produce in strong natures.

A brown, lithe, handsome girl, with gipsy blood in her veins; graceful, but strong as a sailor lad. She wears the scarlet woven cap of the sailor and the blue knitted guernsey and fisherman's boots, and she rows her punt and shoots wildfowl; but for all that she is never unwomanly. She is as pure and strong as the salt air of her native marshland, and she

stands out against the blackness of the tragedy like a white-breasted sea-gull against the dark background of a mud-bank.

And if Mehalah be the wing-broken sea-gull, Elijah Rebow is the cormorant of the story - swarthy, strong and grasping.

Watch a cormorant! You will never see him "fooling round," wasting time in graceful curves and undulations of flight.

Swiftly and straight he flies from point to point, turning neither to right nor left, as if fiercely intent on doing what he wills, regardless of everything around him.

And there was no "fooling round" in Elijah's way of dealing with the girl whom he loved with a passion as fierce as hate itself.

"You don't belong to me!" jeered Elijah. Then slapping the arm of the widow's chair, and pointing over his shoulder at Mehalah, he said scornfully: "She says she does not belong to me, as though she believed it. But she does, and you do, and so does that chair, and the log that smoulders on the hearth, and the very hearth itself, with its heat, the hungry everdevouring belly of the house. I've bought the Ray and all that is on it for eight hundred pounds. I saw it on the paper, it stands in writing and may not be broke through. Lawyers' scripture binds and looses as Bible scripture. I will stick to my rights, to every thread and breath of them. She is mine."

That is Elijah's way of wooing.

On the oak lintel over the fire place in Red Hall is a deeply cut inscription -

"When I hold, I hold fast."

This is his gospel.

He and she are both strong, George De Witt to whom she has given her heart is weak, and so he has no scruples in forcing himself between them and striving by theft and treachery, and even by attempted murder, to grasp her to himself.

"You have a strong spirit; so have I. I like to hear you speak thus. For long you have let me see that you have hated me; you have fought me hard, but you shall love me yet. We must fight, Glory; it is our destiny. We were made for one another, to love and fight, and fight and love, till one has conquered or killed the other."

But rough and brutal villain as Elijah was, one cannot well help feeling a little thread of pity and sympathy for this strong man whose fierce heart is tortured with love for Glory - Glory "with her great heart, her stubborn will, her strong soul" - and who knows that her lover has no single quality worthy of her.

Did the author find the germ of this powerfully drawn character on Mersea or in Mehalahland? Not an individual one, perhaps, but beyond doubt he found the germs in the human material around him.

I have referred to the influence of the isolation and solitude of the marshlands on individuality of character, and in the case of a man with strength of will and intensity of character this individuality would become overmastering. On these low level lands almost

inaccessible at times, cut off from the outer world, and intersected with a maze of winding creeks, where only a scanty living can be gleaned, the fierce, unscrupulous man who owns farm and marshes and saltings and creeks and fleets, is magnified by his isolation into a sort of tyrant king.

An old boatman who ferries between Mersea and the mainland told me one day, in a philosophic mood, that "man rules the world, and the `Daviil' rules the elements."

And so Elijah ruled his little marsh world with a rod of iron, and no one dared stand against his will.

In the old smuggling days the whole of this district was notorious for the trade in contraband; those who knew the guts and channels, and the intricate tracery of the tidal creeks, could run their goods into the heart of the marshlands, almost under the noses of the Revenue men, and all the farmhouses were storehouses for smuggled goods. Smuggling begets the spirit of lawlessness, and even today, although men no longer find it worth their while to risk life and liberty in defrauding the Revenue, the old fierce blood of the smuggler still runs in the veins of many of the natives. They hold to what they get, or to what they consider they have a right to hold, with fierce and grim determination, and the man who interferes with them is hated with an intensity worthy of the old times. A handsome, stalwart race of vikings with tribal feelings and local prejudices strongly developed.

"Well," you may hear a native say, "I 'lows I ain't got nothing to say against Abraham, but how about his grandfather, where was he born? He wasn't a Mersea man."

If a man has set his heart upon a duck gun, and another buys it over his head at a bigger price, the intending purchaser thinks he has been robbed, the other man has taken the bread out of his mouth; he himself had the greater right; he has been defrauded. And so he swears a feud, which must be handed down from father to son, and woe to the son who does not take up the quarrel and carry it on. In this spirit, widely spread rather than individualised, we may find the germ of Elijah Rebow.

From the *Essex Review*, July 1894

SBGAS Newsletter 1994/95, No. 18, p. 4