

RICHARD JEFFERIES

by

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Among the earliest things which I can remember well is the North Wiltshire country, and the satisfaction of feeling that it was the country of Richard Jefferies. I was proud to find Ramsons in a hollow near Bassett Down — Jefferies had not found it, as he confesses somewhere; and to hear a labourer call the Marsh Marigold "water bubble" and "crazy" — Jefferies had said that the people were ignorant of so common a flower. Several years passed before I could believe that he was dead, and I remember thinking that a tall, lean man who ran well with the V.W.H. hounds — he had a glorious view halloo — was Jefferies, though that was as late as 1892. I expected to see him as a man might expect to see Pan in Arcadia, resting sometimes from heat or rain in an old church at Wroughton, or Wanborough, or Lydiard Millicent, I used to think of him, and repeated with funny religious fervour the words at the end of *The Amateur Poacher*: "Let us get out of these indoor narrow modern days, whose twelve hours somehow have become shortened, into the sunlight and the pure wind. A something that the ancients called divine can be found and felt there still."

Even the "lardy cakes" from a village baker's seemed finer food because Jefferies had known them and deplored their increasing rarity. Anything good or pleasant that I noticed in that countryside seemed to belong by right to him: as when in, February, while the roads were heavy, I heard a little village girl say that it would be a good thing when the cuckoo came and picked up all the mud and made a clean Spring. Not many of the people knew his books: fewer still knew anything of the man; and what they knew was not easily accessible. Country people do not formulate and announce their tastes and affections. They know their native fields, but do not talk of them any more than two hundred years ago men wrote of them. I think that some of them thought of Jefferies as a priest who was not to be vulgarly discussed, but that others held him to be an heretical interpreter who had disclosed too much. I never met one who was ready to make money or glory out of reminiscences or even inventions. One who had been at school with Jefferies would not say a word to satisfy the enthusiasm of a timid and youthful inquirer. Perhaps there were not any obvious things to reveal. Readers of the 'Eulogy' guess as much. Jefferies was hardly of a nature that ran much risk of events and adventures. Those who really knew him would probably not undertake to explain or supplement what his books tell us. And now I daresay that is best. He shall be one of the few modern men who have escaped publicity and not renown. He shall be as Sir Thomas Browne is — a man whom only his books prove to have existed -- who preserved the mystery of

authorship, and may one day come to be as mythical as Virgil seemed to be to the Middle Ages. In mythopoeic times he would probably have been a wood god in a few generations, or have had a statue as the genius of the little willowy River Ray. As he says in "Amaryllis at the Fair,"— "It was his genius to make things grow — like sunshine and shower; a sort of Pan, a half-god of leaves and boughs, and reeds and streams, or sort of Nature in human shape, moving about and sowing Plenty and Beauty."

And yet Jefferies is a personality. I do not mean that he had a tricky, suave, and apparently intimate style; he had not: at his best, he was apt and direct; but he could, and many times he did, write abominably without caring at all. Nor do I mean that it is easy to get to know him and like him through his books: it is not easy to know him, and not always possible to like him. But I mean that in reading any one of his books I have always had a sense of a man behind it, of a man whom to know would be to set a higher value than ever upon his work. What is more — readers are always receiving hints that the man is great, and that his work is sometimes hardly more than a faulty gospel by a not always careful or precise listener to the prophet's words. In the end, readers should come to have an admiration for the personality of Jefferies which it is not a simple matter to trace; and in its turn this admiration will compel them to set a value upon his ordinary work which is sometimes not easily to be justified.

Certainly, this sense of Jefferies' personality is not due to anything I have read by other men about his life. He was born at Coate (pronounced something like Court and something like Cart) near Swindon, in 1848: his father being the last of his family to own Coate Farm. Apparently the family was odd, reserved, independent, and unsuccessful. From the age of four until the age of nine he lived at Sydenham with an aunt, and was at school there. Then he went home, and was at a Swindon school. But all that we know of his childhood is that he "read everything," that he was much out of doors, and that he was sensitive, not strong, but masterful, and of a quick temper that easily passed into tenderness. At Sixteen he and another boy ran away, and spent a week in France — intending to go on and walk to Moscow; returning to England, they tried to get to America, but failed: we have only the pitiful and senseless outline of a good tale. He continued to read and to draw; one room at Coate Farm was given up to him. It is likely that reading was to him an adventure that was good for its own sake. He liked it; he must have absorbed much; but, though Besant says that "it is evident from his writings that he had read a great deal," he became the least bookish of writers. He sought out what suited him rather than the beautiful, and his few quotations and derived passages seem to be entirely his own. He had no kind of literary admiration; a book was life and it helped him to express his own life. Between the years

1869 and 1877 he became a reporter to *The North Wilts Herald* and other local papers, and did other journalistic work. He wrote a history of Swindon. He wrote stories which were not so romantic as they prove him to have been. He wanted to be a London journalist: he sent novels to the publishers. His health was bad; but in the worst times he believed in his own "ultimate good fortune and success". In 872 he wrote his excellent letter on the Wiltshire labourers to *The Times*: in 1873 he wrote for Fraser's on "The Future of Farming." In 1874 he married, and in the same year began publishing novels at his own expense. But he went on writing practical country essays, and then suddenly found that it was easy for him to describe the country. From that time most of his work was devoted to the country books which we know. He lived in the country or at Surbiton, moving rather often. He met with a fair literary success – that is to say, he was busy, uncomfortable, and poorer than his neighbours, during the best years of his life – until the long illness before his death in 1887. He had few friends, but of the nature of his intercourse with them there is little sign. He walked and wrote and suffered. Probably he was brought up in a conventional religious way; but was apparently a man who had no understanding of religions; his reported death-bed prayers are only painful, and not surprising in their irrelevance. This is nearly all that has been told about Jefferies, and it is certainly one of the most astonishing failures among biographies to show us – which is their business – the life out of which the books arose.

If we knew more of the outward life of Jefferies we should have at least one advantage: we should be able to understand "The Story of my Heart" more completely. As that wonderful autobiography now stands, it is somewhat incoherent and imperfectly intelligible. The only English book which can be compared with it is Wordsworth's "Prelude", and that is simpler and less equivocal by far. Jefferies' book is almost incapable of thorough analysis as a symphony; and perhaps it is fairest to read it as a boy reads it at the age of nineteen or twenty, sim in that way the excrescences lose their importance and the most difficult pages are volatilized so as to have something like a due part in the result. The most noticeable thing in the book is perhaps the writer's independent emotion and thought, the frank and brave impressionism of his view of life. He claims himself "to have erased from his mind the traditions and learning of the past ages, and to stand face to face with nature and the unknown." He is an isolated human being looking at Nature with the help only of genius and of ancestors who had looked at it incuriously for generations. He does not say, as he might have done, that Wordsworth's view or his contemporary Tennyson's view was this or that, and that he differs from them or goes beyond them here or there. He leaves books behind him, and goes out on to the Downs, a more lonely

man than was ever there before. He becomes "lost" and "absorbed into the being or existence of the universe," and he prays that he may have something from sea and earth and sky by which his soul may be enlarged. He strives after some secret (which he believes to be hiding there) by which the human form "may achieve the utmost beauty." He wishes to reach a mode of life in which the mind and soul can be more continuously and fittingly employed than they now are: and "to furnish the soul with the means of executing its will, of carry: thought into action." As a field for this new life, he believes in "a nexus of ideas of which nothing is known." There are passages in his discourse that will remind readers of M. Maeterlinck of "*The Buried Temple*". But he is opposed by Nature: Lonely himself, he imagines an equal loneliness for mankind. Nature is 'distinctly anti-human'; many of its parts, as for example, the creatures of the sea, "call up a vague sense of chaos; chaos which the mind revolts from." In his fine, ironical romance, "*After London*", the inexhaustible strength and hostility or indifference of Nature are suggested by his descriptions of the relapse of men and fields into barbarism.

In his fine *The Story of My Heart* he dreams far forward of man journeying lonely and with his fate in his own hands. And yet his sympathy with the universe is extraordinary. It is no wonder that he was remote from religions of the past, for he seems at times to be on the edge of a religion entirely new. Except Shelley, no one so much as he was aware of the universe. He says himself that he was "conscious of the earth, the sea, the sun, the air, the immense forces working on"; his soul "was as strong as the sea, and prayed with the sea's might"; and "earth and sun," he says, "were to me like my flesh and blood, and the air of the sea life. We might almost think that he has

"The cloudy winds to keep
Fresh for the opening of the morning's eye,"

and is indeed a minister of Nature.

He seems to have thought some things inhuman even in the works of men. Pictures are "flat surfaces"; they have nothing to do with the advance of mind of which he dreams. But the knee in Daphnis and Chloe and the breast" - "the glowing face of Cytherea in Titian's Venus and Adonis" - "Juno's wide back and mesial groove"--'"Cytheria's poised hips unveiled for judgment" - these things were related to the forces of the world; they were to him as "the outcry of the hunted hare" to Blake; they called up the same thirst which he had on the grass, in the sun, and by the sea. The marble men and women of Greece had something of himself and of what he longed for.

"These were they," he says, "who would have stayed with me under the shadow of the oaks while the blackbirds fluted and the air swung the cowslips. They would have walked with me among the reddened gold of the wheat. They would have rested

with me on the hill-tops and in the narrow valley grooves of ancient times. They would have listened with me to the sob of the summer sea drinking the land. They had thirsted of sun, and earth, and sea and sky. Their shape spoke of this thirst and desire of mine – if I had lived with them from Greece till now I should not have had enough of them. Tracing the form of limb and torso with the eye gave me a sense of rest".

The Venus Accroupie in the Louvre recalled the loveliness of Nature. He says that the light and colour of summer air were to him "always on the point of becoming tangible in some beautiful form," while the statue in turn expressed the colour and the light and "the deep aspiring desire of the soul for the perfection of the frame in which it is encased." In the presence of that statue, too, the thought of something beyond the old forms of life returns; "the conception of moral good," he says, "did not satisfy one while contemplating it"; and though he cannot name his new ideal good, he thinks that it will in some way be associated with "the ideal beauty of Nature."

The brow of Caesar keeps him to the same theme. The conspirators destroyed "the one man filled with mind."

They should have tried to keep him alive; their act interrupted a divine curve of intelligence which Jefferies seems to connect with the progress he desires. It amazes him that in twelve thousand years men have not built a house or filled a granary for themselves, or organized themselves for their own comfort. He still hopes for a time when "no one need ever feel anxiety about mere subsistence", dreaming of great spaces of ease and happiness in which men may capture the beautiful and good. Yet he is himself greedy of physical life, and envies Ninus and Semiramis and Nero, and the American lumbermen felling trees. "Fulness of physical life," he dares to say, "causes a deeper desire of soul-life." He wishes to be always with earth and sun and sea and star The contour and curve and outline of an ideal human form "indicate immortality." Death and disease do not sadden so much as they ang him; yet he hopes.

Such is the personality which we must feel in reading Jefferies if we are to know the true worth of his books. *The Story of My Heart* is the key to the rest; for in it he shows us the value which he sets upon things; it is a lexicon from which we learn the meaning of words in his vocabulary. He was one of the great ones who now and then rediscover those ancient matters – the mortality of man and the strangeness of the world. All his books are full of them, if they are read aright. A little thought or personal confession comes in the midst of what seems to the careless reader to be dull and undigested observation, and it shows the man and casts a rich shadow over the writing round about. *Amaryllis at the Fair* is

full of them. "Amaryllis" is a fine novel which is probably not much longer to be neglected because it is unlike Besant's. If it is to be neglected, I see no use in all our modern reading of Lamb and Borrow and the Elizabethans. In Jefferies sympathy with all life, he comes near to Blake; in his sense of the visible world, of earth and sea and sky, in which men are placed, he is with Mr. Hardy. But nobody so much as he continually reminds us that Nature truly lives. He never condescends to it, never treats landscape as a mere picture, though there are pages in which weariness or necessity has made him appear to be a sportsman or a naturalist. He never intrudes upon Nature in style or thought.

How could he, when he had achieved that harmony with her which gives the opening chapters of *The Dewy Morn*, for example, a religious sensuousness? If there is any book in which the rapture of love appears so clearly to be part of the divine rapture of "Earth, ocean, air, beloved brotherhood" as in the passages which I am going to quote, I do not know it.

"She was bathing in the beauty of the morning – floating upheld on the dewy petals. A swimmer lies on the warm summer water, the softest of couches, extended at full length, the body so gently held that it undulates with the faint swell. So soft is the couch it softens the frame, which becomes supple, flexible, like the water itself.

"Felise was lying on the flowers and grass, extended under the sun, steeped in their sweetness. She visibly sat on the oak trunk -- invisibly her nature was reclining, as the swimmer on the sun-warmed sea. Her frame drooped as the soul, which bears it up, flowed outwards, feeling to grass, and flower, and leaf, as the swimmer spreads the arms abroad, and the fingers feel the water. She sighed with deep content, dissolving in the luxurious bath of beauty.

"Her strong heart beating, the pulses throbbing, her bosom rising and regularly sinking with the rich waves of life; her supple limbs and roundness filled with the plenty of ripe youth; her white, soft, roseate skin, the surface where the sun touched her hand glistening with the dew of the pore; the bloom upon her – that glow of the morn of life – the hair more lovely than the sunlight; the grace unwritten of perfect form – these produced within her a sense of existence – a consciousness of being, to which she was abandoned; and her lips parted to sigh. The sigh was the expression of feeling herself to be.

"To be! To live! To have an intense enjoyment in every inspiration of breath; in every beat of the pulse; in every movement of the limbs} in every sense!

"The rugged oak-trunk was pleasant to her. She placed her hand on the brown, stained wood – stained with

its own sap, for the bark had been removed. She touched it; and so full of life was her touch that, it found a pleasure in that rude wood. The brown boulder-stone in the lane, ancient, smoothed, and ground in times which have vanished like a cloud, its surface the colour of old polished oak, reflecting the sun with a dull gleam – the very boulder-stone was pleasant to her, so full of life was her sense of sight.

"There came a skylark, dropping over the hedge, and alighted on a dusty level spot in the lane, His shadow shot a foot long on the dust, thrown by the level beams of the sun. The dust, in shadow and sunshine – the despised dust -- now that the lark drew her glance to it, was pleasant to see.

"All things are joyously beautiful to those who feel themselves to be; but it is only given to the chosen of nature to know this exceeding delight

"With her soul grew her love; this purest love, and yet strongest of passions. Her young limbs became stronger, her young chest broader, her shoulders and her back finer: a firmer pulse throbbed in her veins. So the soul enlarged as day after day of musing passed, and those long half-conscious reveries which are to the soul as sleep to the frame. She rejoiced in the morning and the sunrise, and felt the glowing beauty of the day; she saw the night and its stars, and knew the grandeur of the earth's measured onward roll eastwards, the hexameter of heaven.

"She saw these things because at her birth love was born with her; the flame was lit with her life, and must burn till the end...

His immense, simple personality is at one with the oak and the grass as if he were somehow involved in their beauty and life. He seems to be conscious of all life that is about him, down to the plants in the arch of a bridge which is lit by reflection from the water. His merely physical sight is wonderful; he has confessed that it was sometimes painful not to be able to cease to see. In "Bevis," the boys' book for all who admit to being or having been boys, he says of Bevis that he never forgot the sun and stars; he "lived not only out to the finches and the swallows, to the far-away hills, but he lived out and felt out to the sky." Even if that book were not the only boys' book which is without a trace of condescension in matter and manner, it would be invaluable as a proof of Jefferies¹ observation.

No other writer leaves us with such a sense of his infinite riches as Jefferies. A book like "Wild Life in a Southern County" seems almost to exhaust a broad strip of English country, and yet it exhausts Jefferies no more than the fields. Hardly a sentence is given to anything but fact.

If he did not set everything down, I feel that all Nature was at his right hand. But, at the same time, no other great writer surely had a fainter vocation. He was so steeped in life that it was an effort, and a painful one, to write. His Amaryllis envied neither the great musician nor the great painter; she was "a passive and not an active artist by nature;" so was he. He says that could he choose, he would go on seeing beautiful things, and not writing. He calls Nature formless; he likes to point out how many fields an artist could make nothing of; and often he seems to have deliberately reproduced this formlessness which (out of compliment) he has called inartistic. There are pages, in "The Gamekeeper" and "Nature Near London" and other books, which were forced out of him by his need of a certain income. Some of his transitions are inexcusable except on this ground. He must often have been offended by paper and pen, as he tells us that the sun was offended. "The sunlight," he says, "put out the books as it put out the fire." Yet his big, simple moods will seem to a true lover to enchant his least perfect pages. For he was like the oak tree, which has but three or four moods -when it is bare, when the buds glow, when it is green, when it is ruddy, when it is dead. These moods are all important to him, and to the tree, and therefore they are beautiful. But the beauty is not always quite human. It is as if he wrote with clay and not with ink. He did not desire the little beauty that is far withdrawing from Nature, and often inspired not so much by its true strangeness as by mere novelty. He would, omit nothing by choice. He would seem to have been Nature's advocate, and to have striven to say all. Of course he failed. But his effort, is one of the most splendid things recorded in written words, and we have only to read such things as the opening of "My Old Village" to admit that among his other gifts, Nature had given him a great manner, the manner of perfection.