

read by the Rev. HENRY HALL in October 12th 1958

Very early in his career Richard Jefferies dedicated himself to the task of helping other human souls to see the beauty and glory of the world, to which many are blind or unobservant. I want to try to explain how it was that he became such a dedicated spirit, living for nothing else than to seek to open the eyes of others so that they might be able to see as he saw, and possess the same worshipful and adoring spirit.

When quite a young man he would walk out in the fields and the downlands near his home until he reached a height so that he could see more clearly the hills and vales, and breathe more deeply the purer air of the uplands. As he looked around him his soul became lost in wonder, love and praise. The beauty of it all enthralled him and he became lifted up above the world of ordinary things into a world of glory and splendour. All the petty worries of daily existence were forgotten; he felt himself at one with all things and with the spirit indwelling in all things. This was an experience of religious ecstasy, rightly to be described as mystical. This is how he describes it himself:

"I looked at the hills, at the dewy grass, and then up through the elm branches to the sky. In a moment all that was behind me, the house, the people, the sounds seemed to disappear and to leave me alone. Involuntarily I drew a long breath, then I breathed slowly. My thought, or inner consciousness, went up through the illumined sky, and I was lost in a moment of exaltation ... I was absorbed; I drank the beauty of the morning; I was exalted."

This strange new experience of being lifted up altogether above the things of time gave him a lofty feeling of aspiration, a desire that he might live a better and nobler life. Feeling one with all men and all created life, he lost all desire to serve himself alone, all miserable, petty desires of self-interest. He prayed with intensity:

"Let my soul become enlarged; I am not enough; I am little and contemptible. I desire a greatness of soul, an irradiance of mind, a deeper insight, a broader hope."

This deep experience compelled him to fling himself on his knees on the grass in reverent adoration of the living spirit - the divine spirit - revealing itself in all the beauty he saw before him, and indwelling all life.

Although his ideas about religion were very different from those generally accepted by those he knew intimately, so that he questioned much in common theological thinking and was therefore regarded by many to be an unbeliever in religion, yet in his mystic experience, when he was utterly

overwhelmed by his sense of the miracle and mystery of life, he was actually in direct contact with God.

His experiences at these particular moments were more real, more vital than those of the average church-goer, and he prayed with fervour:

"I was plunged deep in existence, and with all that existence I prayed ... All the glory of the universe filled me with broader and furnace-like vehemence of prayer that I might have the deepest soul-life."

If that was not a living religious experience I do not know what it was, and it led him always to look out on the world around him with the eye of faith. In many of his writings we learn that the beauty of the world and his feeling that the divine was most clearly expressed within it, gave to him the fullest desire for a better and nobler life:

"I chose the highest room, bare and gaunt, because as I sat at work I could look out and see the more of the wide earth, more of the dome of the sky, and could think my desire through these."

Many people find their immediate approach to God in other ways. Some see God primarily in love revealing itself, as it does so wonderously in human lives. Others feel the deepest sense of God when they hear and respond to the stern call of duty. Many are most sure of direct contact with the divine spirit when they join together with other like-minded souls in praise and prayer. Jefferies seems to have found his nearest approach to the divine spirit when he was most closely in contract with the beauty revealed in nature, which for him of course included human nature in its loveliest forms of expression.

The moments of mystic vision which Jefferies experienced did not make him want to indulge in them simply because they brought to him the feelings of a joyous ecstasy. Rather, he desired, as far as it might be possible, to lend something of that vision to others, so that he and they together filled with the inspiration of such vision, might live better and nobler lives, thereby acting less selfishly and more hopefully, thus becoming the bearers of light and joy to their fellow men.

He disliked and severely criticised one of the forms of religion with which he was so familiar in his day, in which it was claimed that men should worship God and seek to serve him for one purpose alone; that they might win for themselves happiness in the world hereafter. He regarded that kind of religion as an inordinately selfish thing. He himself desired to live nobly and unselfishly in order that he might make a heaven here and now for other struggling and suffering souls:

"Would that it were possible for the heart and mind to enter into all the life that glows and teems upon the earth - to feel with it, hope with it - and thereby to become a grander, nobler being. Such a being, with such a sympathy and larger existence, must hold in scorn the feeble, cowardly, selfish desire for an immortality of pleasure only, whose one great hope is to

escape pain. No. Let me joy with all living creatures, let me suffer with them all – the reward of feeling a deeper and grander life would be amply sufficient.” *

There was no selfishness at all in his religion, for he sought to spend himself without stint in the service of his fellow men:

“Let me have wider feelings, more extended sympathies, let me feel with all living things, rejoice and pray with them. Let me have deeper knowledge, a nearer insight, a more reverent conception.” *

He cries out with the deepest spiritual fervour his purpose to aid others to find the fullness of life:

"How willingly I would strew the paths of all with flowers; how beautiful a delight to make the world joyous. ... I would submit to severe discipline and go without many things cheerfully, for the good and happiness of the human race in the future. Each one of us should do something, however small, towards that great end."

Richard Jefferies was painfully conscious of the great burden of sorrow and suffering that lay on the heart of humanity, some of which were the result of a man's own weakness and sin, whilst other burdens arose out of man's inhumanity to man. It was his love of all that is beautiful which made him see, more clearly than most men do, the horror of all things ugly and evil. Consequently, he was filled with a powerful reforming spirit, and he dared to believe that there are the divinest possibilities before mankind, and he called upon truly devout souls to live and labour for the realization of these splendid possibilities:

“Up then and labour, and let the labour be sound and holy. Not for immediate and petty reward, not that the appetite or the vanity be gratified, but that the sum of human perfection may be advanced.” *

Such was the witness of this brave writer, who died at the early age of thirty-eight, but not before he had given a stirring message of hope to the world. One writer has said of him: "The certainty and rapture of his experience of spiritual emotion is all the more amazing when we remember that the record of it was written in agony, when he was wrecked with mortal illness and his nerves were shattered with pain." The passages I have quoted from Jefferies own works, were written when he was very near to the end, but his physical pain seemed to serve only to enhance the glory of his spiritual vision and his burning prophetic message of beauty and hope will be a continual source of inspiration to many who are wise enough to ponder upon his teaching.

The last words he wrote with his own hand in his note-book less than two months before he died were: “I dream of Ideality.” Those who learn of him

and: begin to share his spirit in some measure will themselves also dream of Ideality.

Notes: All quotations are from "The Story Of My Heart" except those marked * which are from the essay, "The Spring Of The Year."

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