

RICHARD JEFFERIES' MYSTICISM.

By EDNA MANNING.

Richard Jefferies' work is distinguished from other naturalist recorders such as W.H.Hudson and Gilbert White because it contains a deeper significance and mystical experience allied with a love of nature. He was misunderstood in his own day as he is in some quarters to-day, and this is partly because mysticism is misunderstood by many.

Mysticism is a happy state of man recognising unity between this world and the spiritual, and all hold mysticism as 'a changeless Life in all Lives.' A mystic recognises the soul at one with the Universal Soul. Realism does not only attach itself to the tangible – it deals with the consciousness of another kind even more wonderful than the tangible. It is with this part of Nature that Jefferies is concerned. Such mystical philosophy runs through nearly all of his essays and stories, making them throb with the joy of living, and the miracle of Life. The trees talk to Bevis (one of his characters) and the oak tells of its wisdom and our folly. Felise in THE DEWY MORN places her hands on the rugged oak trunk and feels "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."

To understand Jefferies' intimacy with Nature you should go to Liddington Hill and climb its back and greet the air as he did, and with every step nearer to the summit feel its force and recognise it as part of your more, boisterous self. Look over the open landscape to the vale; watch your shadow cast on the opposite side of the ancient ditch, and meet in your mind all the other peoples who have trod the turf and felt exultation just to be up there, and find there a sense of living – a real sense – totally alien to the artificiality of the town. Of being at a oneness with Nature and being happy because of this.

The lone hiker I saw walking the ramparts knew the secret, and so did the girl who sang on horse-back – she could easily have been Felise – for she was in love with life. These people may or may not have read Jefferies – but they held the secret, or great miracle Jefferies was aware of and succeeded in depicting through literature, as in THE STORY OF MY HEART, an expression of his inner-self in relation with nature.

In this book these moments of mystic ecstasy were not divorced from reason, for Jefferies calls the soul the mind of the mind. He writes:

"Natural things are known to us only under two conditions – matter and force, or matter and motion. A third, or fourth, or fifth – no one can say how many conditions – may exist in the ultra-stellar space, and such other conditions may equally exist about us now unsuspected. Something which is neither matter nor force is difficult to conceive, yet I think it is certain that these are conditions. When the mind succeeds in entering on a wider series, or circle of ideas, other conditions would appear natural enough. In this effort upwards I claim the assistance of the soul – the mind of the mind. The eye sees, the mind deliberates on what it sees, the soul understands the operation of the mind."

This is perfectly logical reasoning. And Jefferies concludes the chapter with this sentence:

"Instead of slurring over the soul I desire to see it at its highest perfection."

This sentence sums up the purpose of his book – to depict a way through Nature for man to discriminate between the false and the whole. It is not so impossible – even a criminal, unless

he is mad, knows by the instinct of the soul that he is doing wrong; yet his intellect will convince him that he is being clever. If we all followed the inclination of our good impulses we should soon come nearer to that perfection of the soul that Jefferies knew was possible. But there are a hundred and one motives to stop us, living as we do, in our highly civilised state, and the only cure is to get away from it all sometimes and find the freedom and detachment of Nature.

He recognised the immortality dwelling within all living matter. His explanation of this understanding of the soul, or the thinking sense is found in THE STORY OF MY HEART;

"The supernatural is miscalled; the natural in truth, is the real. To me everything is supernatural."

If we are ready to see with Jefferies that the Universe, its composition, evolution, movement, space and power is still unexplained – with all our scientific knowledge – then supernatural is the right word. There is nothing which can explain consciousness, good or evil. We can only try to understand and to accept ourselves as part of it, ourselves as supernatural, even.

"How strange that condition of mind which cannot accept anything but the earth, the sea, the tangible universe!"

In this sentence he is answering the critics then and to-day who only appreciate his works of descriptive nature study. These same critics who have tried to distort 'THE STORY' by calling it sentimental.

"Without the misnamed supernatural these to me seem incomplete, unfinished. Without soul all these are dead. Except when I walk by the sea, and my soul is by it, the sea is dead. These seas by which no man has stood – by which no soul has been – whether on earth or the planets, are dead. No matter how majestic the planet rolls in space, unless a soul be there it *is dead*."

It is by his SENSES and not intellect that Jefferies stakes his faith.

All of us are becoming aware of the 'I' within us and aware of the supernatural behind the tangible in every bit of Nature. Jefferies shows that the supernatural and our spiritual selves are the realism whereas chemical matter is inert. The two forces are embryonic, and combined we become closer to existence or the Mystery of Life itself. Richard Jefferies was not confused with this issue, for he knew that evil could be overcome by the action of the soul, and that it was man's struggle to reach this state of perfection and so order his life to advancement.