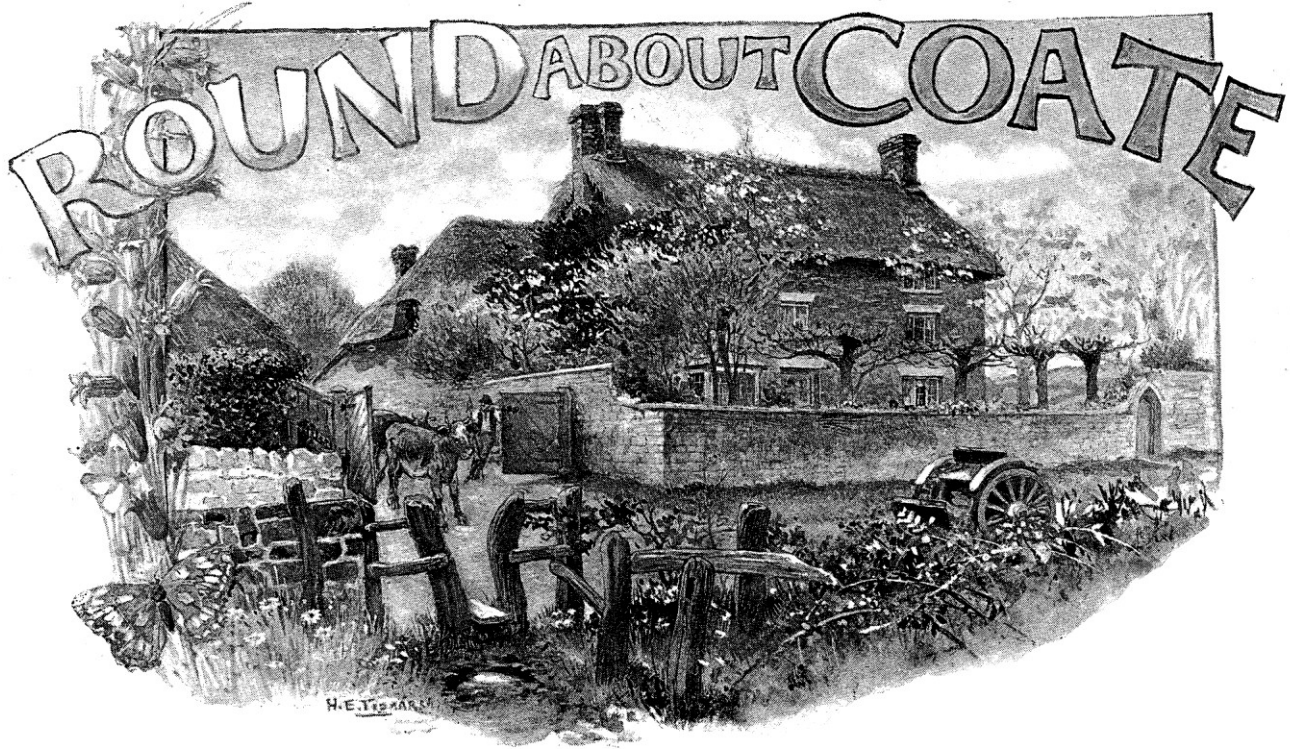




*Richard Jefferies' House.*

NO other writer who is, to use Mr. Walter Besant's phrase, so "full" as Richard Jefferies, imparts less information to the reader. It is not that there is any lack of facts in his writing; on the contrary, it is an aggregation of minute details. But if you compare his work with that of an observer equally vigilant and acute, White of Selborne, for example, the difference becomes apparent at once. White's method will always be the more popular. He is invariably at his best when investigating a disputed point as to the habits of some wild creature. His simple ambition began and ended with a desire to chronicle fully and accurately the life-history of the *flora* and *fauna* of the woods and streams and meadows round his parsonage. How well he accomplished this end is proved by the fact that to this day people turn to his simple annals for information. He is read for the knowledge he conveys. No lover of nature could be less of a poet.

Jefferies was the exact opposite of all this. But for a certain repugnance to using the literary slang of the day I would call him an impressionist; although, by those who misname themselves impressionists, he is persistently misrepresented as addicted to catalogue-making. Yet it need hardly be pointed out that he never made a systematic study, never a complete list of anything. From the scientific student's point of view he was an idler in the land, sensuous, and therefore sensitive to nature's choicest colours and sounds and fragrances; passionate, and so given to dreams and musings and speculations. When he one by one enumerates the birds and flowers and weeds of an English hedgerow, you feel, in the end, that his object has been neither botanical nor ornithological, but poetical. It is not into the study of a zoologist you have gone, but to the presence of an artist who has transferred a mood from his own mind into yours. The reader carries away little new knowledge,

but many pleasant memories. Most of us have, in the course of our lives, spent many happy days, which it is impossible to recall without thinking of the blue skies and white clouds of which it was his delight to write. It is the secret of his charm that he can re-awaken these impressions. He is ~~an~~ an enchanter who, at will, transports you into the midst of a green English landscape, where the swallows skim the corn-fields, and the butterflies flutter among the wild-flowers, where the chaffinch chirps from the expanding oak-leaves, and the water sparkles to the sunshine. The result differs from that produced by Gilbert White as night differs from day. One man pleases by his love of facts, and by ministering to our thirst for knowledge; the other by adding to our æsthetic pleasures.

Obviously a man with a nature such as indicated, must have been greatly influenced by the characteristics of his native country, and one can hardly wonder that, during recent years, Wiltshire has been freely visited by those who like to trace the early surroundings of a favourite author. And were it possessed of no literary interest whatever, the district round Coate would still be highly worthy of study for its own sake. For one thing, it is rich in rights-of-way, a privilege dearer to the tourist than the farmer. Across the meadows and over the wheat-fields, by wood and down and streamlet, the faintly trodden paths or rustic stiles invite the stranger to go, like the wind, where he listeth. Even now, but far more so thirty or forty years ago, trespass as far as a native boy was concerned had practically no existence as an offence. This was, in itself, no slight advantage to a lover of nature.

Perhaps the most favourable point for obtaining a first impression of the country is a corner of Chisleden Churchyard. Close by it is a slip over the wall, and so on to a foot-path, that across deep meadows and past the well-known lake leads to Coate. On Sundays, the heavy-footed rustics having, with slow, trailing step, lounged up as far as here, would stop

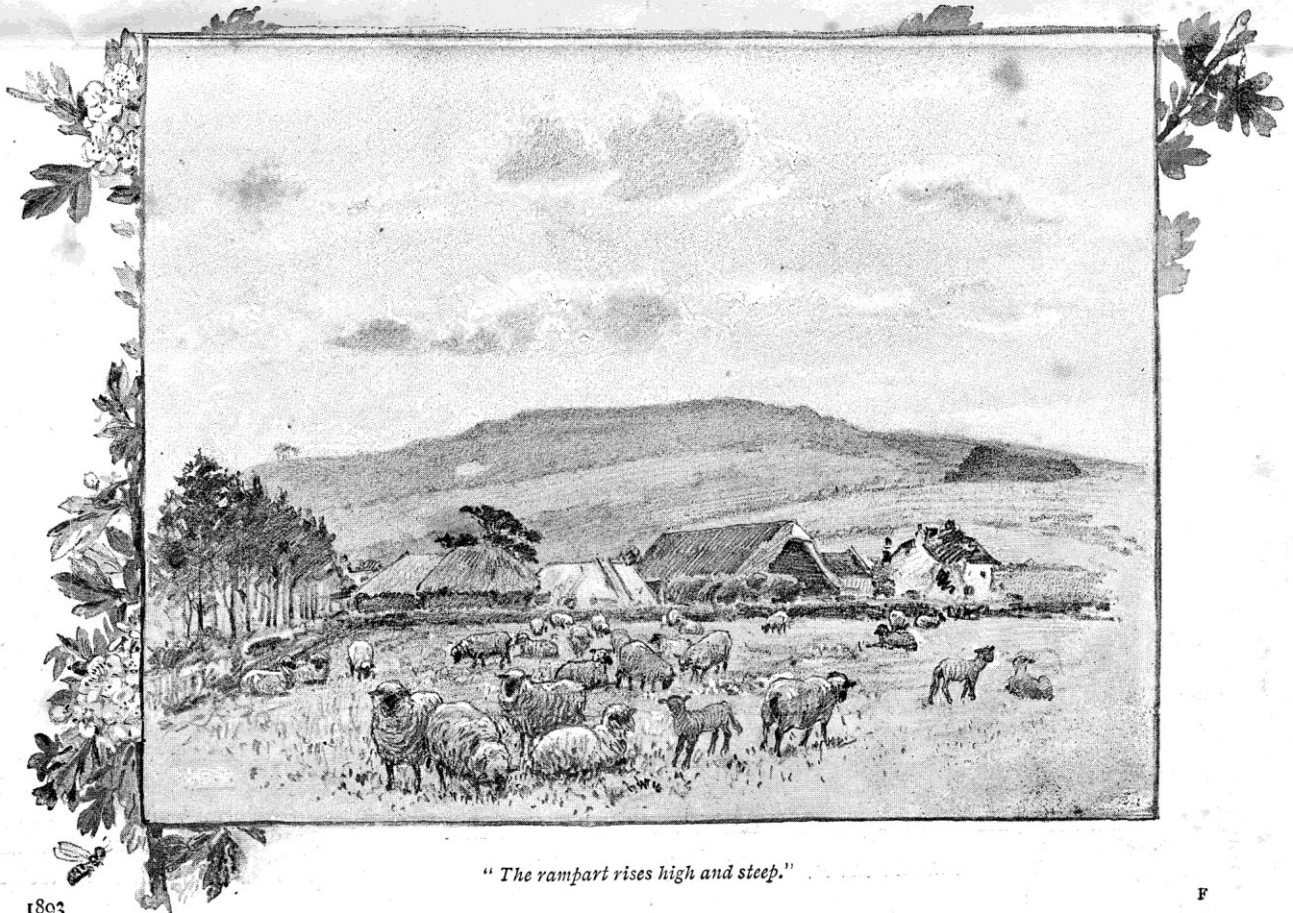
and hold a kind of Parliament before and after the beginning of service. The initials of many are still to be seen on the stones. It is an ideal place for a rural rendezvous. On the churchyard side the wall is not too high to sit upon, yet high enough to lean against. From it the spectator looks down on the yard of the Parsonage Farm. So near are the copses, too, that while I was standing and thinking of it one sunny morning the voice of the first cuckoo rang out clear and bell-like from one of them. The present tenant of the farm told me he remembered how, long ago, his predecessor stood every Sunday morning at the church-door, and paid his besmoked servants as they entered, hardly a book between nine of them. That was certainly an effective way of ensuring a congregation, though I am told that hardly one could read and write, none dreamt of understanding the sermon, and the majority peacefully slept through it. National education has changed all that, and no apostle of the new humour is criticised more keenly than the village parson of to-day.

Though the church dates from the middle of the twelfth century, there are very few really old tombstones in it. Some time ago the farmers took to using them for repairing and building their houses. A pathway is entirely paved with headstones. You cannot get out by the back door of the vicarage without walking over a "Here lyeth the body of" someone.



*The Keeper's Home, near Coate.*

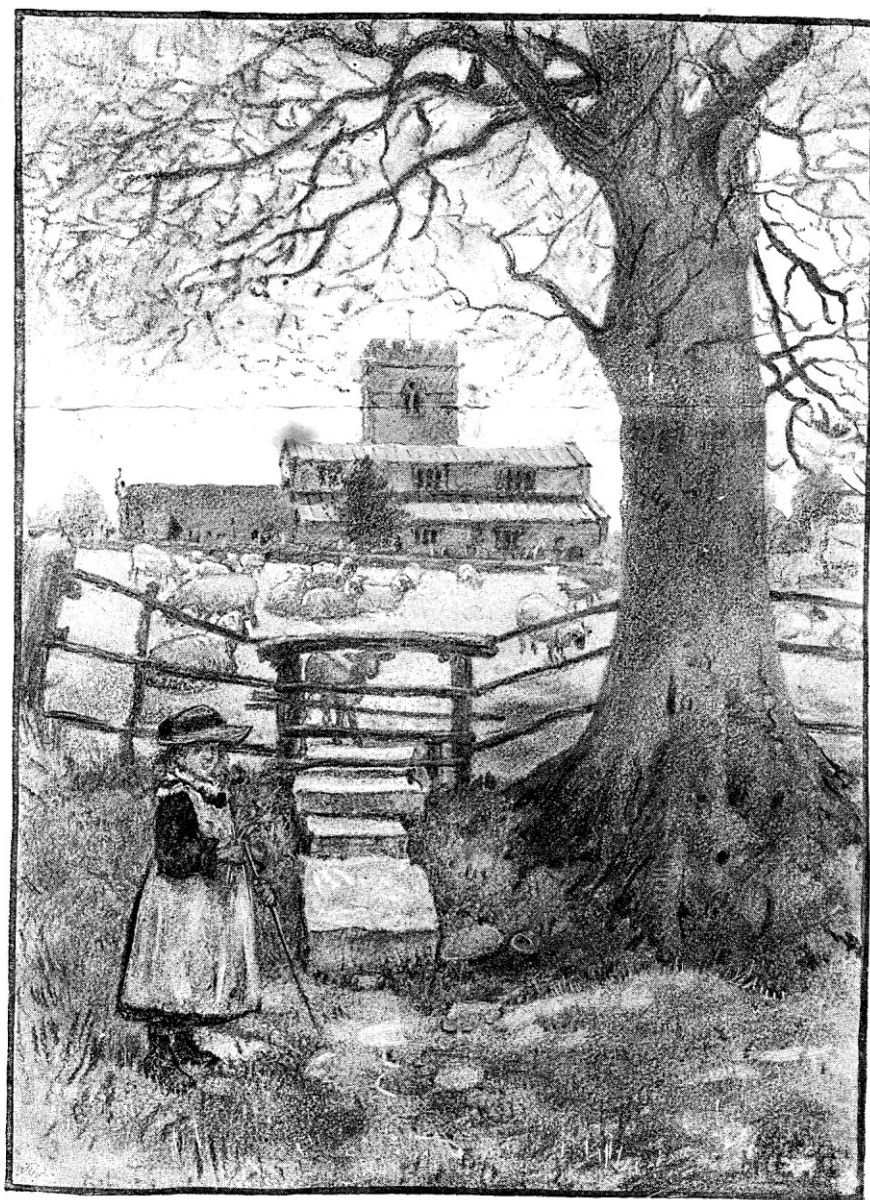
If the wall of the church wanted repairing, it seems to have been a common practice to patch it with a morsel from some antique monument. Within the church there is what appears to be a richly-carved stone sepulchre, but all the names and dates have been rubbed off. Jefferies attended Chiselden Church every Sunday, he was married in it, and while sitting in the high-backed family pew he framed this and many another musing picture: "The tall grass growing rank on the



*"The rampart rises high and steep."*

graves without, rustles as it waves to and fro in the wind against the small diamond panes, yellow and green with age; rustles with a melancholy sound, for we know that this window was far above the ground, but the earth has risen till nearly on a level; risen from the accumulation of human remains." That, however, was not quite true; lazy grave-diggers heaped the earth against the church wall, as one may see from the hollowed-out condition of the rest.

From the church to Coate a pleasant pathway leads across the meadows and past little woods and plantings that in spring are miraculously bright with wild flowers. Nowhere have I found anemones so large and splendid. They nod to the blowing wind under almost every tree. From many a shady little nook comes the fragrance of sweet violets, which, with bluebells and primroses, are made into bunches by the rambling school children. The meadows are pied with daisies, and the first cowslips, anticipating summer, are thrusting up amongst them, and that early comer, the small celandine, one of Wordsworth's prime favourites, is spreading out its golden breast like a careless prodigal! How could anyone play in these fields and not learn to love them all!



*Chiselden Church.*

As you walk, innumerable birds flit about and sing with the happy desire that spring brings, and they all shine with the colour and gloss that love gives them. The oxeye's wings, of a shade of blue exactly like that of a forget-me-not in flower, actually glitter as he clings to the mossy bark of an old tree or flutters among the tender young leaves. A chaffinch in red and white as bright as a new uniform twinkles boldly from the bough, while from the very top of the tree the chiffchaff calls out his name monotonously; perhaps it is only because our own ears are so gross that we do not recognise the endearing accents which doubtless his mate finds there.

This may be found within a short walk of Coate farm and within view of the reservoir or lake on which Job Brown once kept his cranky boat with its ill-assorted oar on one side and scull on the other. You may pass the very hatch on which Jefferies and his brother used to sit and watch the pike and perch. The brook, in which Richard used to sail his little boats, vowing all the time he would be off to sea as soon as he was a man, is nearly dry now.

The farm-house has been frequently described, but what was oldest about it is quietly crumbling into decay. Hardly anyone will enter the dilapidated summer-house which the boys used as an armoury, and where you may still see their scribbling on the walls, for it is so rickety that it threatens to fall down one of these days. It is the same with the very ancient parts of the original dwelling, which for aught I know may have stood there since the days of Queen Elizabeth. The modern parts of the house, that is to say the whole inhabitable portion of it, does not look older than the present century. Some bits of thatch still remain to show how pleasantly the quaint farm-house must have matched the perfectly idyllic garden. Most of us are very familiar now with the mulberry and the brown beech, the apple and the pear trees, that indifferent to the fame or obscurity of their surroundings, still bring forth leaf and flower in the spring and ripe fruits in autumn. Had Jefferies been spared he would now have been only in the prime of life; yet many of his acquaintances have passed out of our ken. One of them, Thomas Smith, whose shanty formed the theme of a very early paper, died on the very afternoon I had appointed to see him. Without exception, the poor people speak very kindly of the family at Coate, although it is undeniable that "Farmer Baden" had peculiarities that they did not understand. He was easy and good-natured to a fault, and though an excellent talker, when started, he usually went about in a common labourer's smock, and was extremely reserved. If after dinner he took an

extra forty winks, or watched the mice too long, he was as angry to find that his labourers had begun work without him as another would have been at their waiting.

Close to Coate Farm is Day-house Farm; near to the tombs of the Jefferies in Chiselden Churchyard are the tombs of its former tenants. That Richard Jefferies should have fallen in love with his girl playmate, Miss Baden, was the most natural thing in the world. His home is more attractive than hers. The old homestead of the Badens was burnt down during the lifetime of her father, and the somewhat pretentious yet bare and cold-looking house, shown in the illustration, was erected in its stead. The houses were within such easy distance of each other that communication between them must have been incessant.

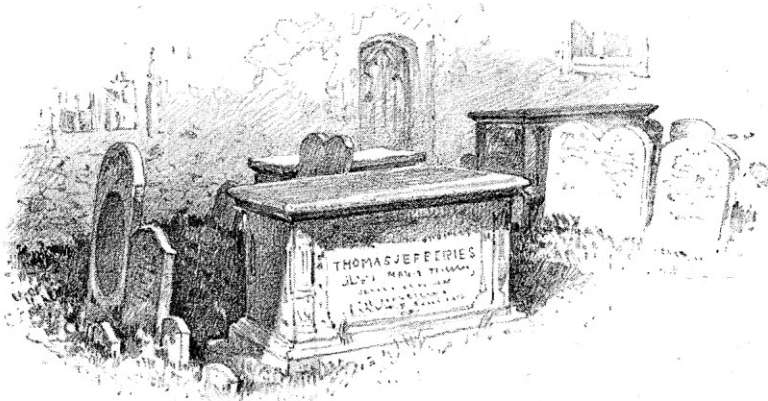
Not very far off, and beautifully secluded, is a cottage with which, as he grew up, Jefferies became more and more familiar. It stands in a place called Hodgson's Bottom, and is the residence of the keeper—a keeper, it would probably be more prudent to say, lest some slave to literalism should at once declare him to be the veritable Gamekeeper at home. The house, as will be seen from the illustration on p. 17, is substantial and well thatched. It has got a new tenant recently, a young Scot, and the singular old man Jefferies knew has gone to live some miles off. To understand something about him is to realise very strongly how little of the novelist was about our essay writer, for the keeper is a character if ever there was one, and a writer whose eye was keen for the whims and humours of men would have found a treasure in him. The peculiarity of his dress is that, unlike the rest of his class, he wears a tall hat, and this tall hat he scarcely ever doffs. Many tales of his easy good-nature are told, and it is said that never during the whole course of his career did he take a poacher. He is distinguished by a voice so loud that it is a terror to womenkind, and on entering a copse or preserve his first performance was to clear his throat with a sonorous "Ahem!" that gave warning to the very jays and magpies. Amateur and every other kind of poaching must have been greatly facilitated by the tall hat and strong, freely used voice. Jefferies unfortunately had not the art of laughing at people, or both the "Amateur Poacher" and the "Gamekeeper at Home" would have been very amusing books.

The keeper appears to have had rather more than the average share of pride in the number of vermin he has killed, and apparently did his best to simplify the natural history of Wiltshire. In his "larder," near the pheasant preserve that



*The Hatches behind Coate.*

starts from the end of his cottage, he has nailed up two long horizontal bars about five feet from the earth, and upon these, as upon the back wall of his cottage, he hangs or crucifies the victims whose bodies now dangle in the wind. Who are the malefactors of the woods and meadows? Approach cautiously, so that the wind does not come between them and your nobility and you shall see. Firstly, there is not an owl among the lot, but that very probably is because hardly any are left. The farmers complain bitterly of the increase of rats, and when that is so, it may be assumed that the night birds have been decimated. Here, however, is the bright-plumaged jay, a bird Jefferies loved to watch, and though not many of his kind are now to be seen, he is such an inveterate egg thief that we will not impugn the justice of his punishment. Beside him are many carrion crows, who have been guilty of the same offence. Why the useful little jackdaws should undergo the death penalty it is not easy to imagine, and I was particularly sorry to notice that deadly war had been waged upon



Some of the Jefferies tombstones.

the hawks. Here are kestrels, and kestrels soaring and hovering and hawking form such a pleasant feature in the scenery of Wiltshire, that it is painful to witness this attempt to exterminate them. Nor may the keeper shield himself behind the interests of sport. Kestrels live mostly on field-mice, and only attack the weakest game-birds, so that shooting is really benefited by their presence. And here too, *horribile dictu*, is the prettiest of all our hawks, the little brown merlin, one of a species imminently threatened with extinction; it is most regrettable that any sportsman should allow his keeper to kill a bird like that. When we turn from the bipeds to the quadrupeds, we see still more of the *dramatis personæ* of Jefferies. These creatures are the actors in his open-air drama. Here are weasels so dry and shrivelled you fancy one of them might have been the very wretch that figures in "Wood Magic." Stoats, "the tiny bloodhounds" that so often appear in his books, swing back and forward, and many tails tell of wandering cats that have paid the penalty enacted for their having forsaken civilisation, while the pads of foxes and of badgers prove that other murders have been committed.

Near by is the residence of a squire whom Jefferies knew, and who most likely supplied a well-known character in one of his works. But indeed the characters, persons, and places round Coate formed such a large portion of his material that it would take a volume to enumerate them. It is far more important to notice the character of the trees concerning which he wrote so well. The most beautiful of them, and, to my thinking, one of the most beautiful trees in England, is a magnificent witch elm that from a little eminence overlooks the combs and denes into which the earth is broken and furrowed near the keeper's lodge. Its great gnarled trunk, with rough indented bark, its giant interlacing boughs flung out and drooping proudly, new life starting from every twig, combine to form a majestic example of still life, a green monument moulded by the one perfect and unerring sculptor. There are many oaks growing ruddy in spring, but none so large and

shapely as this elm. In the meadow hedge-rows are quantities of curious pollards, whose rugged clefts and crevices have been filled with earth and sown with seed by that careless and ingenious gardener the wind. Starry dandelions blow in nooks of the trunk, twenty feet above the ground; on the crown a gooseberry bush has been planted, and many a nettle and wayside weed whose seeds were carried up by bird or breeze, flower and bloom higher than the tree ivy has climbed, higher than the topmost bough of the tall hawthorn hedge. Nature has found a plant for every available nook. Green and gold and white are the woodlands with foliage and windflower and buttercup, daisies and marsh marigolds lighten the ver-

ture of the deep rich meadows; black hawthorns with snowy blossom are already whitening the hedges.

A merit of this fertile scene is that it exists on the verge of a wild bleak moorland. Coate stands amidst carefully fenced and cultivated fields. The land is enclosed and worked like garden ground. There is even a suggestion of suburbanism in the great dairies, the carefully irrigated meadows, the milk carts and cans of many dairy farms. Move up towards the downs and the character of scenery and agriculture gradually changes. Hedges and fences disappear till the great turnpike becomes only a white track through far-extending ploughland. Nay, if you follow the Ridge Way that runs close past Chiselden in a short while, that is, just as you pass into Berkshire, you will find that it loses altogether the character of a travelled road, and becomes a wide green ride, bounded on each side by a ridge of turf. Vehicles seem to pass that way but seldom, for grass is growing in the very cart ruts, and though the surface is rough, it is covered with turf as green and thick as there is on the pasture land.

Like the majority of ancient tracks it runs along the crests of the hills, past many a scene of interest. Just above the village of Ashbury, where three black copses form a triangle, the ancient roadway passes a favourite haunt of Jefferies. It is the Cave of Wayland Smith, ould Waylam say the rustics,



Wayland Smith's Cave, near Coate.

the smithy of Weland the Anglo-Saxon Vulcan scholars will have it, an ancient sepulchre standing in one of the copses. Sweet violets were blowing close by when I was there, the chalk downs with the white horse carved upon their sides gleamed in the distance, and it was pleasant to sit on the ancient stones and dream of the magician sleeping in iron, and his assailants in their mailed armour, or to re-fashion the spacious days of Queen Elizabeth, and try to fancy what kind of journey a traveller like Scott's Tressillian could have made along this straight wild way. The watted sheep folds, the gorse just breaking into its summer blaze, the boors in their smocks have in the intervening centuries hardly changed more than the everlasting hills. Revolution has been busy elsewhere, but here the new generation of man resembles that which went before as closely as the forest leaves of this spring resemble those of last, as the rooks and peewits flying over these fields resemble those seen by the warriors of Hengist and Horsa. The river of life hurries past. Every moment new drops are before your eye, but the stars that look on for æons alone can know how long it takes for the general appearance to be changed or the course altered.

Everyone who knows the work of Jefferies has read his exquisite description of the Downs in "Wild Life in a Southern County," and to add to it would be an act of superfluity. How faithfully and vividly he has transcribed the scene from nature anyone may discover by climbing the height above Liddington on a fine summer day. Here is the ancient camp (see p. 17), in the trenches of which he lay, and listened to the wind swishing amid ditches and ramparts, or watched the white butterflies fluttering and chasing one another in the sunshine. The rolling green hillocks and hollows, the hazel copses, the very hares that start up from the sward and scud away over it, all seem to have stepped out of one of his pictures. From an outlying eminence one can take in the whole scenery of his books. Away past Highworth and on to Malmesbury, to the utmost limits of the county in fact, there is an expanse of fine English soil, with its thick woods and hedgerow trees, its fair and fertile fields, its thatched, tiled, or slated farm buildings, its church towers and mansions, every-

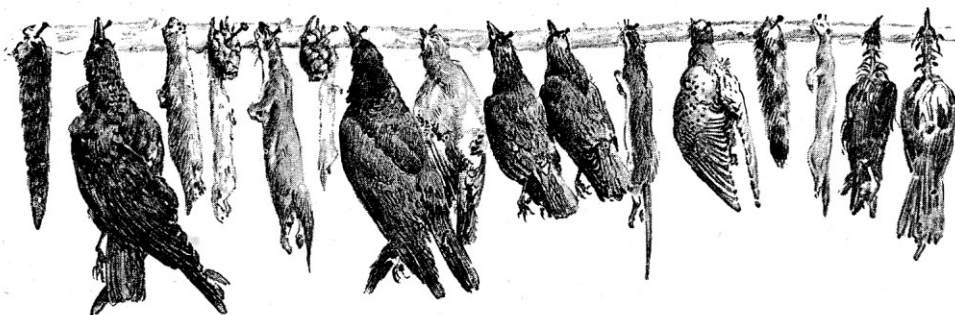


Thomas Smith's Shanty.

thing, in fact, that goes to make up one of our typical landscapes. Overlooking all are the low, brown downs, reminding one of so many other wolds and English hills, and offering a pressing invitation to him whose feet love to wander in quiet and solitary places. For miles and miles I have walked across them without seeing a human face, save that of some cowboy tending his charge on the unwallled expanse, or farmer's lad ploughing the unfertile bits of arable.

Such are the places among which the essayist lived. They have not changed much in the last twenty years. A few small proprietors have succumbed to modern difficulties, a few small farms have been merged in larger ones, and steadily little by little the cottagers are perhaps advancing to a state of higher enlightenment, but the process is as slow as to be almost undiscernible. Nature fashions many generations from the same mould, and the hamlet child of to-day may, if he have the eye for it, see exactly the same kind of men, hear the same tunes from the birds, rejoice in the same sparkle on the water that pleased the senses and formed the mind of the distinguished man whose brief career has added a new interest to every flower and tree, every bush and corner and scarp around Coate.

P. ANDERSON GRAHAM.



The Larder.