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RICHARD JEFFERIES: FIELD-NATURALIST AND LITTERATEUR.

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ILLUSTRATED BY VAL DAVIS.

THERE is a private and particular reason why I should write about Richard Jefferies, and with that reason I shall deal presently. I know of only one Englishman who stands near Jefferies as an observer of the facts of natural history, and as a literary recorder of those facts: Gilbert White, of Selborne, the father of English field-naturalists and the greatest literary artist, after Buffon, who ever dealt with the animal kingdom. The Rev. Gilbert White was a scholar who took his degree at Oxford, and a gentleman in comparatively easy circumstances, with influential friends. Richard Jefferies was the son of a poor Wiltshire farmer, delicate in health from boyhood and quite unfit for farm life, who turned in youth to provincial journalism—the most unkindly branch of a precarious profession—made a very poor hand of that, attempted fiction-writing again and again, with constant and disastrous failure, possessing, indeed, not one of the gifts or opportunities that make a novelist, and was a shy, proud recluse all his life long. Then, suddenly, and unexpectedly to himself and his friends, he reached a world-wide fame, and even began to make money as a writer on country matters.

The morning of his life had been clouded with care, trouble, doubt, and debt. Only towards noon-tide was his day brightened, and then, immediately afterwards, the darkness came down again. A fatal disease, of which the seeds had long lain dormant, struck him, and he died of consumption in his thirty-ninth year, just when the world had discovered and acknowledged his eminence, and, of course, long before his Wiltshire neighbours had even guessed that the wayward and thriftless son of the Coate farmer was anything but one of life's failures.

With this extraordinary and delightful man—I had almost said, with this genius—I had an acquaintance that lasted over several years. It was, I regret to say—for I never saw him or had speech with him—only an acquaintance, by letter—perhaps I ought not to call it an acquaintance at all, for can one know a man through the post? No; certainly not an

ordinary man; but such a retiring, nervously shy, and proud man as I have since ascertained Richard Jefferies to be, I think may be better known from his letters even than from his speech. It is not every man, and certainly not every Englishman, who can reveal himself by word of mouth. The art of social intercourse is hard to acquire for any Englishman, and is not to be learnt in a small farm-house or on the remote downs of Wiltshire. It is certainly not to be picked up in the office of a small provincial journal. Had I ever met Jefferies in the flesh, his rustic manner—between peasant and gamekeeper—his rustic utterance, his natural reticence, and his awkwardness, would probably have hidden the real man from me. His tongue would never have bewrayed his truer and nobler and intensely sensitive and sympathetic self; but he had a better and more eloquent interpreter than his tongue, that wonderful pen of his, and with this he spoke to me quite plainly, as man to man, and so it is that I dare say to myself—I knew this man.

The business part of my transactions with Richard Jefferies may be disposed of in a few words, but I must deal for a moment with a personal matter. Residing officially in Portugal, in and about the year 1876, I thought well to alleviate the cares and worries of official routine by editing, anonymously if I remember rightly, an important and successful periodical for an eminent firm of London publishers. Richard Jefferies had sent me two or three contributions on rather dry subjects, dealing with country life, and I had published them. One paper was on Village Organization and prefigured our modern County Councils; the other was entitled "Allotment Gardening," and anticipates a great deal that has been done since in that beneficial direction.

I was immensely struck with the lucidity of these papers, the rare faculty of co-ordination possessed by the writer, and the strong, nervous, simple English which he had taught himself to use. In his way of writing I thought I heard a fresh rhythmic note in style, the stamp of an original artist in the use of our English tongue.

I did what an editor can seldom spare time or trouble to do; I wrote to my contributor to tell him how I admired his work. I think appreciation, from the great, unknown, outside public, was rare with Jefferies. Is not the unbiassed praise from strangers too rare with every good workman? Anyhow, Jefferies was grateful, and wrote me a very pleasant letter. This is how our correspondence began. It lasted three years and ended, as agreeable correspondence mostly ends, by pressure of business on both sides.

A little time after Richard Jefferies' death, happening to find myself in the neighbourhood of Coate, I drove over to visit it. I found it a plain, small, bare, rather poverty-stricken farm-house, by the roadside that leads from Swindon, and about three miles from that town. The view of the house from the road through an imposing archway, which our artist gives, is the view which I saw, and which visitors in Jefferies' days saw. The back of the house is more picturesque. There is meadow land there, through which a path goes, leading to the reservoir, made eighty years ago, and already a picturesque and partly tree-



Coate Reservoir.



Supposed hulk of Jefferies' boat.

embowered mere. This reservoir, which fully deserves to be called a lake, played, as will be seen by one of the letters written by Jefferies to me, a very important place in his boy-training as a naturalist. At one side of this mere, or lake, is a really beautiful avenue of trees—or, rather, a winding path bordered by tall trees. It was, as may be imagined, a favourite haunt and place of study for the great field-naturalist, for it is the resort, taking the year round, of nearly every small bird that flutters and twitters in our South of England woodlands. The avenue terminates, and expands into a sort of swamp wilderness, with pools partly overgrown with willows and alders, and encumbered by tangled briars, water-weeds, rushes, reeds, and sedge, haunted by coot, moorhen, sedge-warbler, heron, and wild duck. Our artist has made drawings of every one of the “bits” I have enumerated above and also of a picturesque dell formed by the entrance of a tributary stream from the west. Outside all this water and woodland lie the grass-fields and plough-lands of an ordinary English hunting country, for we are here midway between the Badminton country and the even more famous Vale of White Horse—and, beyond them, the landscape is horizoned by the turf-covered Downs, bare of trees, with their rounded forms rolling towards the sky line, changeless since the Saxons and Danes fought for mastery in England.

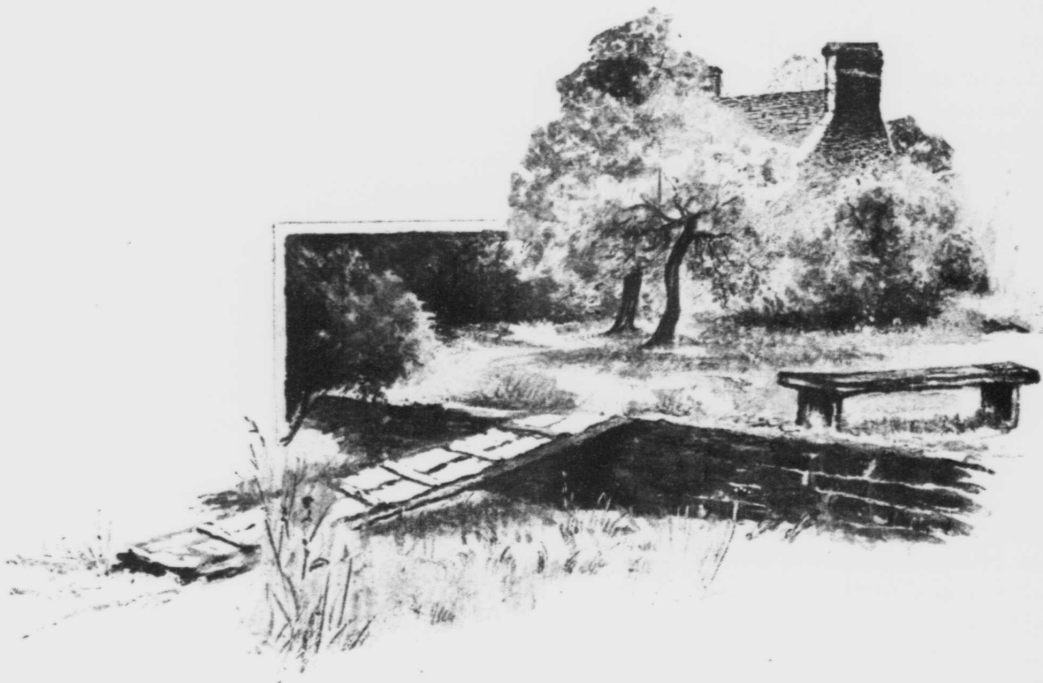
This is the region where Jefferies spent, in his neighbours' opinion, a dreamy, shiftless, idle and unpractical boyhood and youth; and not an incident of bird, animal, and insect life escaped him, nor the growth of a bud into flower or leaf, nor the fall of an acorn or beech mast, nor the twirl of a creeper's tendril in the hedgerow; nor any of the larger aspects of Nature—the rain storm, the wind, the snow, the frosts of winter, and the cloudscape, the sunlight falling on meadow, wood, or hill, the gathering of yellow dawn, or the ruddy glory of the setting sun; the still larger things of human life he recorded, too, for, though he knew nothing of the town and quite mis-read the ways of Vanity Fair from books as ignorant as himself, he knew everything of the people who inhabit the country side, the peasants, men, women and children, the farmers and loafers, the poachers, and their enemies the game-keepers. All this knowledge he took in with marvellous sympathy and receptivity, and held in the vice of a strong memory; but where did he learn the art he had of telling of all this, so that men should see it, spell-bound by the vividness of the picture he drew, piecing together under his magic touch their own slurred recollection of things half seen and wholly forgotten?

For all Jeffries' power and all his ultimate success, the strange thing was that neither he or his friends ever suspected that he possessed this rare faculty of observing and of expressing his observation. The fault was more with him than them—this fault, indeed, always does lie with a man himself, for certainly no one can really help another man to find the vein in him that leads to success or fortune.

He had shown me several short stories of his—I now remember nothing of them but their execrable taste and false sentiment—and I had refused to take them; but even he was beginning to discover, in the spring of 1875, that his novel writing was in vain, for in May of that year he wrote to me—forgetting, no doubt, how often he had besieged me with impossible fiction:—

You may possibly have seen that I am a novelist, and I could write you a short tale, but I cannot recommend myself in this department, for I have never received a single favourable notice of a novel of mine! Tinsley Brothers, the publishers, say that the books are too original and too bold to take for some time.

They were not "bold," but bald, and, so far from being original, they were pale copies of the mild fiction-stuff that had charmed sentimental school-girls and school-boys a generation before; but poor Jefferies still believed in his ideals. His folly, that all but ruined his life-work, is one that nearly all of us have committed or are committing. Our first-formed and mostly mistaken ambitions are the Slough of Despond into which we carelessly and joyfully plunge at the outset of life, and have to wade through and struggle in, and sometimes all but sink deep and stifle in, before we win to the hard ground beyond. A cobbler's son, playing in St. James' Park, sees the troops go by, the bands playing a stirring march, the field-officers in their brave uniform, and swears he will be a General. All "the pomp and prodigality of man" passes before his boyish eyes; all the danger, all the daring, all the glory; he himself, in his day-dream



Jefferies' seat in the garden.

always keeping, by incredible good fortune and forethought, in the centre of events—favoured by fortune—promoted from post to post—heading the armies of his countrymen—the winner of a hundred fights! Then at last, full of years and honours, he sees himself returned from victorious campaigns in far-off lands, and leading armed men through the familiar Park with the fanfar of trumpets and the shouts of the people in his ears—while the ineffable smile of accomplished triumph is hidden behind his own grizzled moustache! A noble dream, but all the while the boy has no turn at all for soldiering and a distinct genius for shoemaking. He will, in process of years, after a painful passage through his own particular Slough of Despond, have to abandon his first ideals and find himself safely landed in the shoe-making line, make a revolution in “uppers” perhaps, or successfully meet a demand for improved “clump soles,” fight his way to fame that way, be known (by advertisement) everywhere within the four seas, and win a name that the bagmen in provincial centres “will not willingly let die.”

Jefferies remained in his own Slough many a long year, longing for the accomplishment of his mistaken ideals, and, at last despairing, the black waters nearly closed over his head.

I flattered myself at the time that I had, perhaps, myself helped him to see where his true strength lay. After getting a long letter from him in December, 1876, of which the following is an extract, I should have been blind indeed not to have seen how he was misusing the great talents he had.

I had already begged him urgently to let me have a series of papers on

Natural History, and had asked him to call upon me if he should come to town. This is his answer;—

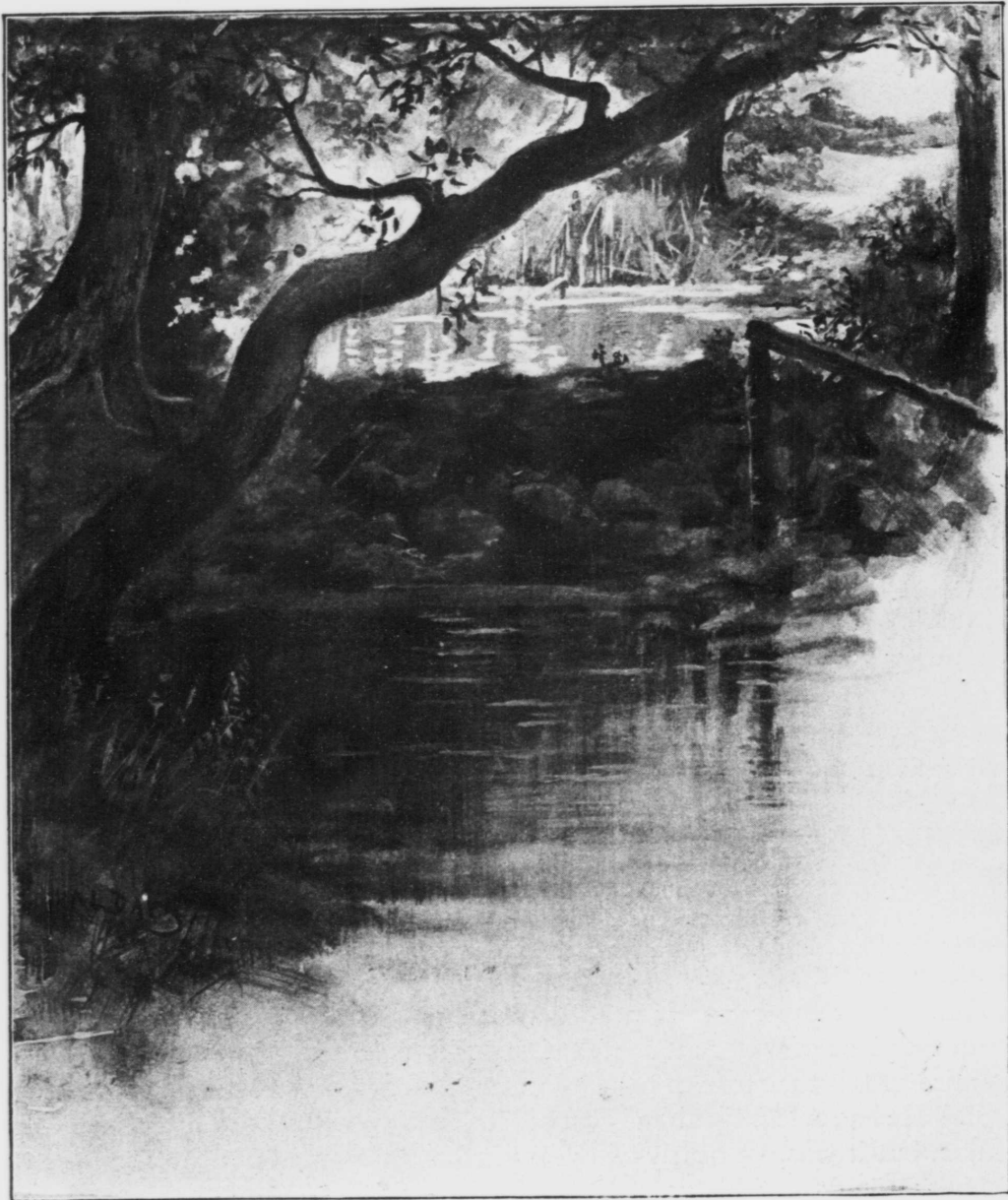
I should certainly be greatly pleased to meet you personally. My personal connection with farming is now almost at an end, though my father still retains his property at Coate. I find literature far more congenial to my tastes, and have spent the greater part of the year near town. I expect I shall be there in the spring most of the time. I stay in Sydenham Park, at Shanklin Villa, where, if you should be in England, I should be glad to meet you. With respect to the Natural History papers, my principal ideas are these. While at home, having very little to do, I studied natural history from Nature—excuse the tautology. I used to take a gun for nominal occupation, and sit in the hedge for hours, noting the ways and habits even of moles and snails. I had my especial wasps-nest, and never was stung. The secret with all living creatures is—quiet. Be quiet, and you can form a connection, so to say, with everything, even with such a brute as the pike-fish. This went on for six or seven years—idle, you will say. Whether it was summer or winter, I would always find something to interest me, and, in time, extend these observations to the great Downs adjacent, which are literally teeming, so to say, with matter for thought. I own that the result has been a profound optimism—if one looks at Nature metaphysically. Since that pleasant time, which I still regret, I have corrected my notes and endeavoured to organise them by reading the best books I could find on such subjects, including geology.

There is at Coate a reservoir—it is sixty years old, and looks quite as a lake—of some eighty acres of water. I think I could write a whole book on that great pond. I mapped it, and laid down the shallows and sand-banks, when I was a schoolboy, and I learnt how to manage a sailing boat on it. Even the mussels slowly crawling on the bottom, I believe, have taught me something. You can trace the action of the rain and frost and the waves on its banks, just as Lyell delineates the effect of the ocean on our coast line; of course, on a smaller scale, but the illustration is perfect. You can trace the action of the brook which feeds it—the sediment and sand carried down have formed shallows and banks, like the delta of a river. If the birds, which I and others have shot there, had been preserved—as I now wish they had been—they would form a little museum. My brother shot a brace of grebes there last week. The auk, the Northern diver, gulls of almost all varieties, come occasionally after storms. I should not attempt a laborious learned description, but rather choose a chatty style. I would endeavour to bring in some of the glamour—the magic of sunshine and green things and calm waters—if I could. It would give me much pleasure to write such articles for you.

This paper never was written. It was saddening when I looked at this beautiful piece of water at Coate, after Jefferies' death, and remembered his promise to tell the story of his explorations of this wonderful and interesting pool. He had evidently already turned his thoughts in the true direction of his genius, but it was yet nearly two years before he brought out the *Gamekeeper at Home*, the first of his great Natural History series.

I said that Jefferies' place in Natural History was beside Gilbert White, of Selborne. In point of fact he achieved more than Gilbert White ever attempted, for he not only observed, catalogued, and recorded the ways and doings of wild animals, but he saw all aspects of wild life through the eyes of a poet and interpreted them to us. Jefferies was a quite extraordinarily close observer of the material facts of the life he studied, but, unlike some of the great literary realists of to-day, he went further and supported a high idealistic doctrine on these hedgerow and woodland documents.

The field-naturalist, to work at his very best, must have a good many qualities that belong essentially to the Teutonic race. He must possess the simple, naive nature of a White or a Beckstein. His philosophy must be



A tributary stream.

of the plodding, inductive kind which finds facts first and fits theories very cautiously to the facts. If he looks for facts only to accommodate brilliant theories thereto, he is a lost naturalist. Then, he must be a man of high principle—truthful to the brink of prosiness—for if he is not that, what are his facts worth to us? I see that I am narrowing the field of Natural History and warning a host of professional persons from the gate, politicians, company-promoters, actor-managers, wine-merchants, horse-dealers, dentists, and so forth!

One circumstance that of itself renders Jefferies' work more valuable

than Gilbert White's, is that, when White wrote, we were in a state of ignorance about Natural History that is difficult now to conceive. We did not even know what to call the creatures we wrote about. We were still speculating as to the mystery of bird migration; and as to a hundred queer facts about wild birds and beasts that are now settled for good. This, however, makes Gilbert White's writings all the more interesting and delightful. I will defy the sternest scientific naturalist to read without some slight thrill of interest the old naturalist's speculations as to whether swallows and martins do really leave these islands, and whether they do not hide and hibernate among us in secret places. He writes, on November 23rd, of the year 1773, to the great naturalist, Pennant: "Do these small, weak birds, some of which were nestlings twelve days ago, shift their quarters at this late season of the year to the other side of the Northern tropic? Or, rather, is it not more probable that the next church, ruin, chalk-cliff, steep covert, or perhaps sand-bank, lake or pool, may become their *hybernaculum*, and afford them a ready and obvious retreat?"

Since Gilbert White's day, we have been to the "Northern tropic" to see, and found our English swallows and martins there in winter; and we have explored countless ruins, cliffs, and sand-banks, and dragged countless pools, and found them not there; and so the theory of hibernation for these species has been demolished, and the doctrine of migration established.

Then again, Gilbert White wrote at a time when our literary English was at its very stiffest and most sesquipedalian, and at its very unfittest to deal with such every day matters as the story of our fields and hedges, but, fortunately, he mostly forgot, even when he was writing to learned men, to write in the learned, Latinised English tongue that Dr. Johnson had made fashionable. He speaks nearly always in the beautiful mother-English, that has made him famous in literature. There is, to be sure, just a flavour of pedantry here and there, but these touches lend an additional old-world charm, and give a touch of individual character to his work.

Gilbert White had, with a pretty wit of the milder sort, a turn for quiet humour, both extremely useful attributes in a savant—as delivering him from a certain class of error—but which attributes a good many eminent scientists make a point of doing altogether without. I have not found any trace of either wit or humour in anything written by Richard Jefferies. Perhaps I have looked carelessly, or not been in sympathy with his particular form of wit, or his humour, but I incline to the opinion that these things were non-existent in him. His repeated transgressions into poor fiction almost prove my case, and the simple fact that, in one of his novels, he devotes six pages—or is it sixteen?—to a description of the muscles, sinews, tendons, and bony anatomy of a young lady's knee!

Richard Jefferies was little of a controversialist, after the fashion of so many of our modern Natural Historians. He saw, he noted, and drew his conclusions from what he saw and noted, but he did not care to dispute about what to him were the eternal verities of nature; there was much less in

him of the scientist than of the poet and the artist. A great deal that he wrote, particularly in his earlier work, was little more than the setting down of his field notes, but with what art does he co-ordinate and marshal them! The statements of fact, which, in an inferior word-artist's hands would be little more than a dull catalogue, are by him grouped and arrayed into a living picture.

Here is a sample of his realistic method. It only describes an English hedgerow, and every peasant, every farmer, every keeper, every squire will agree to the truth of every word of it—and yet we may swear that they never saw the picture as the reader can now see it.

A wild "plum" or bullace, grew in one place, the plum about twice the size of the sloe, with a bloom upon the skin like the cultivated fruit, but lacking its sweetness. Yet there was a distinct difference of taste; the "plum" had not got the extreme harshness of the sloe. A quantity of dogwood occupied a corner; in Summer it bore a pleasing flower, in the Autumn, after the black berries appeared upon it, the leaves became a rich, bronze colour and some, when the first frosts touched them, curled up at the edges and turned crimson.

Then there is his method of dealing with the wider outlooks on nature—or sky, mountain and sea. It is the same patient, careful method. He always writes as an artist, as one who is careful to mould and mint his words or phrases, so that they shall reach the reader in the form and with

the heat wherewith they live in the writer's own mind and heart—the true craftsman's way in all arts. There have been men at all times who feel and think like philosophers and poets, and have a great message to deliver, but have never yet bridged the gulf that always lies between writer and reader. Their genius has been great but their art small. Their fame lives awhile in the breath of their disciples, but when they themselves die, and their disciples die, their fame



Gateway of Coates.



A secluded pool.

ceases and dies too. The world is too busy to go on for ever wrestling with an author's meaning, as a school-boy wrestles with a proposition of Euclid. Jefferies was not of this kind. He was a true artist from first to last—never for a moment forgetting that art is the sword of the literary worker that must for ever be kept sharp and bright.

In the passage I now quote, Jefferies speaks of the sea seen from a height. I wish I had space to quote the whole passage.

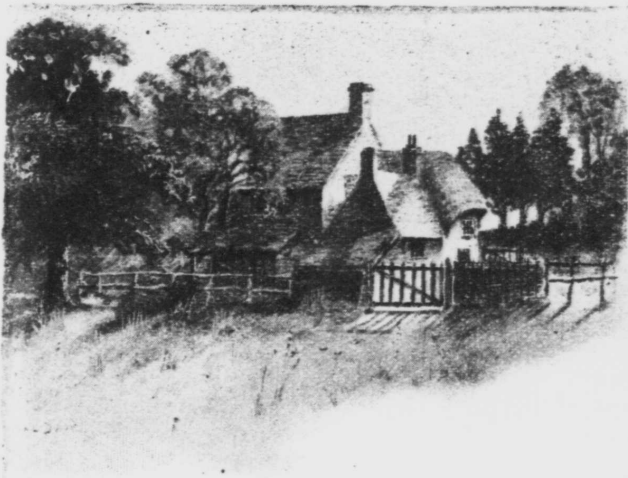
"So the white spray rushes along the low, broken wall of rocks, the sun gleams on the flying fragments of the wave, and again it sinks, and the rhythmic motion holds the mind as an invisible force holds back the tide. A faith of expectancy, a sense that something may drift up from the unknown, a large belief in the unseen resources of the endless space out yonder, soothing the mind with dreamy hope.

"The little rules and little experiences, all the petty ways of narrow life, are shut off behind by the ponderous and impassable cliff, as if we had dwelt in the dim life of a cave, but, coming out at last to look at the sun, a great stone had fallen and closed the entrance, so that there was no return to the shadow. The impassable precipice shuts off our former selves of yesterday, forcing us to look out over the sea only, or up to the deeper even."

I have shown how learned Jefferies was in wild-nature knowledge. It is a department of education somewhat neglected in these days of rush and hurry, and yet the wisest and wittiest men who ever wrote on education would have approved of the training of Jefferies. "I would have thee," says Pantagruel (I quote from memory and away from books)—"I would have thee, my son, to be acquainted with every beast that walks on the earth; with every fish that swims in the seas, the rivers, brooks, and pools; with every bird that soars, or flutters in the air; and with every insect that flies or crawls. Thou shouldst know the properties of every plant and flower and tree, from the Hyssop on the wall to the Cedar of Lebanon; the qualities of every gem that lies hidden in the earth; and every precious drug in all the Southern land." A not very exaggerated compendium of what Jefferies had actually taught himself; but with him all this was but the portal to things seen beyond—the window through which he caught glimpses of the great problem of life—of that which lies for all of us behind the veil of our dull, daily existences.

Here is a passage that may, perhaps, persuade the reader that I have not said too much for Jefferies in this line:—

On the wings of the dragon-fly, as he hovers an instant before he darts, there is a prismatic gleam. These wing textures are even more delicate than the minute filaments on a swallow's quill; more delicate than the pollen of a flower. They are formed of matter indeed, but how exquisitely it is resolved into the means and organs of life! Though not often consciously recognised, perhaps this is the great pleasure of summer, to watch the earth—the dead particles resolving themselves into the living case of life—to see the seed-leaf push aside the clod, and become, by degrees, the perfumed flower. From the tiny mottled egg come the wings that by-and-by shall pass the immense sea. It is in this marvellous transformation of clods and cold matter into living things that the joy and the hope of summer reside. Each blade of grass, each leaf, each separate floret and petal, is an inscription speaking of hope. Consider the grasses and the oaks, the swallows, the sweet, blue butterfly—they are one and all a sign and token, showing before our eyes, earth made into life. So that my hope becomes as broad as the horizon afar, reiterated by every leaf, sung on every bough, reflected in the gleam of every flower. . . .



Coates from the back.

Let the shadow advance upon the dial – I can watch it with equanimity while it is there to be watched. It is only when the shadow is *not* there, when the clouds of winter cover it, that the dial is terrible. The invisible shadow goes on and steals from us. But now, while I can see the shadow of the tree and watch it slowly gliding along the surface of the grass, it is mine. These are the only hours that are not wasted—these hours that absorb the soul and fill it with beauty. This is real life, and all else is illusion, or mere endurance. Does this reverie of flowers and waterfall and

song form an ideal, a human ideal, in the mind? it does; much the same ideal that Phidias sculptured of man and woman filled with a God-like sense of the violet fields of Greece, beautiful beyond thought, calm as my turtle-dove, before the lurid lightning of the unknown. To be beautiful and to be calm, without mental fear, is the ideal of nature. If I cannot achieve it, at least I can think it."

Richard Jefferies is here no longer a mere observing naturalist, no longer a mere artist in literary expression, but a prose poet, who uses the rhythmic cadences that come naturally to a true singer.

"This strain I heard was of a higher mood!"

He is a pantheistic votary, singing in the great temple of nature, who sees beauty and salvation for himself, even though, at the moment of inditing this great pæan of praise and triumph, he was, and knew that he was, himself swiftly nearing the inevitable grave.