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ONE SHILLING AND SIXPENCE

Richard Jefferies—The Story of a Quest

By SAMUEL J. LOOKER

(Mr. Looker, who lives at Cheadle, is County Councillor for Cheadle and Oakamoor, and Chairman of the County Records Committee. For many years he has been a Publisher's Reader and Critic, specially identified with the writings of Richard Jefferies, the naturalist, and has edited altogether some seventeen books of Jefferies' interest. The following article relates how he came to live in North Staffs. and tells something of his long and successful quest for Jefferies' manuscripts.)

I.

My acquaintance with the countryside of North Staffs. and with its people, extends over forty years. I paid my first visit to Oakamoor in 1910. I had married an Oakamoor girl, and from the beginning, I was deeply attracted by the countryside around that village. In those days, long before the buses had opened up the countryside, when my wife and I were excellent walkers, she and I tramped many a mile across the hills and through dale, lane and meadow, and in the deep woods. A favourite walk, to be taken however at somewhat rare intervals because of its length, was from Oakamoor to Dovedale and back. We would choose a good day with promise of fine weather, and start very early in the morning, when the dew was yet on the grass. Climbing the field path past Golden hill, so named because the sunsets rest lovingly on that spot, and on past the Star Inn, leaving first Cotton and then Caldon Low on our left and the Weever Hills on the right. This early portion of the walk was full of pleasure. The sun shone on the brown earth, the trees of the Star Wood were delightful, the sky arched above us, blue and gold, and the birds sang their best. On the crest of the upland road, we would pause, to look back across the wold, past Cotton, over the Station Fields, over the slopes of



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heathy Gore and remote and bleak Monistone, and beyond, until, in the far distance, a mere shape on the horizon, we saw the Wrekin in Shropshire. After a halt near Blore for lunch, we would press on through Ilam to the Dale and there linger by the Dove, that unspoilt and beautiful stream, until time for tea. Then, in the cool of the day, came the long walk back to Oakamoor by the light of the moon and stars, which shone in a mellow sky above the quiet fields and woods. We have too, spent many hours on the high point of Beelow Hill, near Ramsor, with its incomparable view over the coloured fields. And many another walk we took together in those far off and somewhat primitive days. To the Weevers through Ramsor, to Wootton, Foxt, Waterhouses, Ipstones, Grindon, the Manifold Valley. The High Shutt, adjacent to Cheadle, with frequent visits to Cotton Dell, and then on to Whiston, with Dimingsdale, Alton and other beautiful places, must not be forgotten, or the woodland shades of the Hawksmoor Nature Reserve, in later years, and its delightful bracken covered slopes.

From all this it may be easily gathered that I soon became as great a lover of this particular corner of North Staffs. as my wife was. Indeed, I adopted it, or it adopted me, I do not quite know which. I grew too, as I began to know its people better, to like many of them very much and to look forward to the friendly welcome my wife and I received on our many visits.

It is not possible to write of all the ardent memories of special spots in North Staffs., or of certain days which stand out in memory. Among them we have seen the Star Woods, just above Oakamoor, at Christmas time, with the green trunks of the trees and the tracery of the delicate branches, and a pale blue winter sky above, as things of an almost incredible beauty. And the warm friendly lanes of Wootton, or under a threatening sky, the dark shapes of the Weevers like great crouching beasts; all these places are fraught with happy recollections. One of the greatest pleasures one has always found in this part of the country is to be found in its many beautiful trees, oaks and beeches, especially these natural hardwoods, for I prefer these to the sombre firs or pines.

I little thought years ago, when I visited North Staffs., that, after a long period of time, I should make my home there. The love of North Staffs. and of its people has become more and more a part of my life, until I feel, I hope without undue presumption, that I may be accepted as one of themselves, and certainly I shall always remain, whatever the outcome, a lover of this countryside, to praise that part of North Staffs. between the Churnet and the Dove.

II

Richard Jefferies was born at Coate Farmhouse, two miles from the great railway town of Swindon, in North Wiltshire, on November 6th, 1848. He died at Goring-on-Sea, near Worthing, Sussex, in August, 1887, and is buried at Broadwater. Nearby is the grave of another great naturalist, that of W. H. Hudson. Jefferies is a much greater, more versatile and interesting writer than is generally recognised, for he touched life at many points, and showed himself to be an enlightened and entirely modern man in spirit. Nothing is more irritating or less to the purpose than the view, held by certain of the more superficial writers about him, that he was merely a pleasant

writer on country life and sport, or a kind of cataloguer of country sights and sounds. As was said by Theophile Silvestre of the great French painter, Delacroix, "This man had a sun in his head and storms in his heart." It is not as the author of *The Gamekeeper at Home*, an early book by which he is too often known, that we may truly value Richard Jefferies. His thought, and his work, went deeper than this.

First of all, Jefferies was a pioneer in the history of those who saw men divorced from their mother earth, and, as a consequence, alien from the true springs of their being. He understood and had sympathy with the lives of the 'Men of the Fields' the farmer and the labourer. He described them in words as clear and plain as the paint of a Morland or old Crome. Not the least part of his work as a country writer was to depict a fast-vanishing age, to paint, in colours that have not faded, the lives of our forbears, who lived close to the heart of England. Jefferies' book *Hodge and His Masters*, is a classic, and will live, because of its fidelity to truth, to things as they actually were. These people were alive, moved, had their being, in a world Jefferies knew, and we, by the aid of his genius, may know them too.

I have said that Jefferies was a modern man, although he loved the past, too. Did he not exclaim in a delightful essay, "Outside London" to be found in the *Open Air*, where he describes the country that surrounded London of the Middle Ages:

The sun that shone on the red deer is as bright now as then; the berries are thick on the bushes; there is colour in the leaf. The forest is gone; but the spirit of nature stays, and can be found by those who search for it. Dearly as I love the open air, I cannot regret the mediaeval days; I do not wish them back again. I would sooner fight in the foremost ranks of Time. Nor do we need them, for the spirit of nature stays, and will always be here, no matter to how high a pinnacle of thought the human mind may attain; still the sweet air, and the hills, and the sea, will always be with us.

Jefferies, of course, was deeply influenced as a nature writer by the landscape of the West Country, but later on, the beauty and appeal of Sussex was to come to him in fullest

measure to mingle with the memories of Wiltshire and Somerset. He loved the great chalk downs, and they are not alone in Wiltshire. Sussex owns their spell in its splendid South Downs. Jefferies came to feel their delight. He walked above Worthing in the days from 1877 onwards. He lived at Brighton and Crowborough, and previously for five years at Surbiton in Surrey, and whilst there often visited the South Downs and the coast. He described Ashdown Forest in several of his essays. There are some masterly passages in his strange autobiography, the *Story of My Heart*, which tell of his sudden, overwhelming longing for a sight of the sea, a craving not to be appeased except by a journey to the coast. They tell how he reached the shore at length and went down to the sea, near a cornfield. It was the coast just near Worthing. "Clematis Lane," a beautiful little essay in the *Life of the Fields*, describes a small lane above the same town. Often, in the last few years of his life, Jefferies was to lie on the slopes of the great Downs of Sussex, while, as in the old days on Liddington Hill, near his home at Coate, the wind stirred the grasses and the birds sang. Now the breezes of those same downs blow over his last resting place under their shadow at Broadwater, near Worthing, and in the spring the birds sing in the branches of the trees moved by the sweet briar wind.

It is impossible in a short space to deal adequately with the versatile output of Richard Jefferies. I have not been able to mention the charming early nature books, the *Amateur Poacher* and *Round About a Great Estate*, full of country lore and wise observation, and containing the most vivid pictures of a vanished scene. Then what of *Wood Magic* and *Bevis*, beloved by generations of children?

Toilers of the Field, which was edited by Jefferies' publisher and friend, C. J. Longman, in 1892, five years after Jefferies' death, has the same clear understanding of the problems of rural life as *Hodge and His Masters*. It is vital writing of the countryside. In realism, in rustic authentic colour, no one since William Cobbett has got closer to the bone. Jefferies, was like George Crabbe, a realist, not a romantic. In his descriptions the very air of the fields, the smell of the earth, the sound of the labourer's boots on the stubborn soil and the note of the bill-hook, is conveyed to the reader.

Would Jefferies, who died at thirty-eight, but had already achieved so much in his short span, have accomplished even greater work still had he lived to his full span? Who can say? We do know, however, that all his writing showed, as time went on, a progressive advance in technique, in power of thought, of grasp of subject and expression.

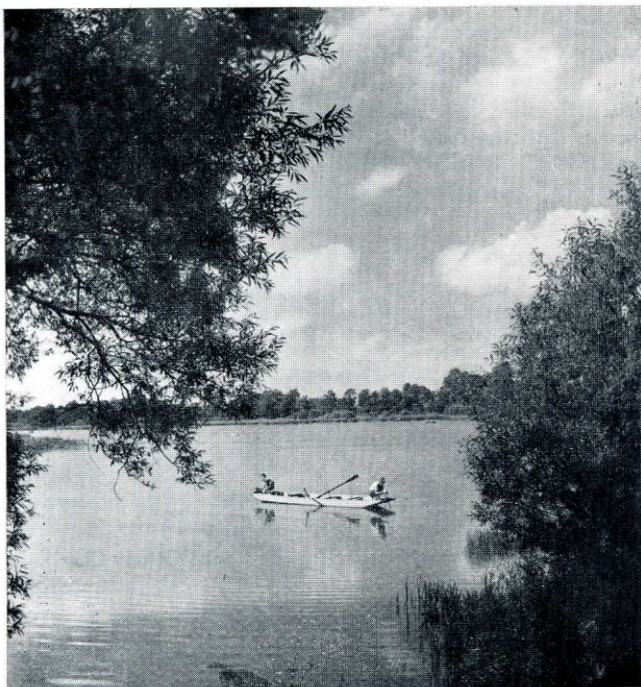
He loved England well, and paid her great tribute by his pen. He has left an imperishable memory, and among nature writers, is with Thoreau and Hudson, for his work at its best, is, like theirs, of vintage stamp.

III

I first read the writings of Richard Jefferies in boyhood. A few years later, I began to collect his books, and then his actual manuscripts. I sought in particular, as time went on, for his Field Note-books and occasional nature notes, which I understood were still in existence, and for any hitherto unpublished papers. In spite of very limited means at that time, I was exceptionally lucky in my search. There was an old bookseller at Swindon who had known Jefferies, and was of the greatest assistance to me. In those days but few seemed to care for Jefferies, or to bother about his writings, apart from the antiquarian bookseller, Spencer of Oxford Street, who had also known him personally, and my friend Henry S. Salt, who had written on Jefferies, but was not a collector.

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Coate Water.

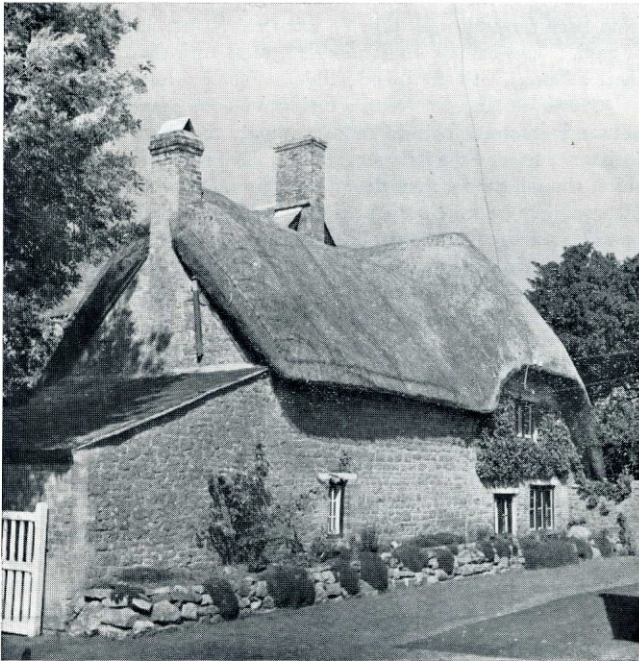
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Jefferies prices have greatly risen of late. Many years ago I gave 5s. for a beautiful copy of the first edition of the *Story of My Heart*, and 3s. 6d. for an equally fine copy of *Field and Hedgerow* and only 4s. for the rare first edition of his novel, *Greene Ferne Farm*. The tendency upwards in price was intensified after the publication of my series of Jefferies books, and when, the other day, I wished to give a friend a copy of the first editions of *Field and Hedgerow*, I had to pay 30s. and £2 10s. for a copy of *Wood Magic*. However, in those far off days I was able to lay the foundation of what proved in the end to be a very comprehensive collection of Jefferies material.

I was put into touch with Jefferies' son, and we exchanged many letters. He was much interested in my editing of his father's work and in my zeal for his memory and manuscripts. He helped me by every means in his power and gave me the greatest encouragement to persevere in my quest, as well as much information and his own early memories.

The help and encouragement of Mrs. Hargrave, Jefferies' daughter, has been invaluable. I shall never cease to be grateful for her kindness and understanding.

After the publication of the first book in my series, *Jefferies' England*, I was able to find in all, sixteen of his Field note-books and a year or so later, the original manuscript of the *Story of My Heart*, the latter from America, where it had been in the possession of a rare book dealer. These treasures, added to the original manuscripts of *Bevis*, *After London*, the *Amateur Poacher*, the *Dewy Morn*, and much hitherto unprinted material, which were the fruit of my long quest, means that I now own most of the Jefferies' manuscripts that can possibly turn-up, including a large number of letters, many of which have not been published. The mere listing of the items of Jefferies manuscripts in my collection, would take up many pages. I am told, by good judges of the subject, that it is one of the largest and most important collections of the original work of an English author in private hands anywhere in the country. One volume, the *Old House at Coate, and Other Unpublished Essays*, has already been issued, and there is sufficient unprinted material left for at least two other volumes in the future.



Old part of Coate Farmhouse.