

The Magic of the Fields (Richard Jefferies)

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Published in *Nature in Books* by P.A. Graham (Methuen, 1891), pp.1-43. Anderson Graham (1853-1925) was the Editor of *Country Life* and *The Academy of Literature*.

My first visit to Coate was paid on a merry October day. The sun shone on hedgerows ruddy with haw and tawny with withering leaf, on stubbles red with thundercups—‘thin bubbles of blood’—and on banks whereto St. Martin had beguiled the gowan, the speedwell, and forget-me-not. Birds as well as flowers seemed deluded into playing at a mockery of Spring. From the oaks that Jefferies loved, from the dense and browning Wiltshire elms, cooed the lovesick ringdove; old rooks were mending their nests; the skylark poured its music from heaven, the robin from the spray; yet a vigorous autumn wind blew upon yellowing copse and spinney, scattering acorn and chestnut on the road-side, and flinging the red-cheeked apples into the grey orchard grass; an occasional horn-note from the woodlands, or the glitter of a crimson coat, told how the cub-hunters were anticipating winter; showers of loose and fluttering leaves were heralding its speedy advent. The Folly-trees were already bare, and raised their black tracery above the smooth and desolate-looking downs. From the top of any hill you see the land of Jefferies all around, uplands of grassy and broken wold, lowlands of England’s most fertile soil. Here lies the raw material out of which he fashioned the glowing and beautiful country of his Essays. Be it done ever so tenderly and lovingly, it seems like an intrusion on the dead man’s secret to search into the poor bare facts that his memory and imagination invested with so many moving charms. Yet if we could but look clearly into his life, and learn what preparation he underwent and what difficulties he surmounted a new light would fall on his work.

The house where he was born stands close to the roadside, separated from it only by a garden bordered by a wall and a row of limes—a comfortable, common-place-looking building. It was occupied by several generations of Jefferies, whose tombs may be seen in Chiseldon Churchyard, and traditions of whose strangeness and eccentricity still abound in the neighbourhood. Except the grandfather of Richard, a thriving but whimsical miller, whose droll figure, as he walked from Coate to Swindon, clanking behind him a chain used for fastening his trousers, is still remembered, the Jefferies appear to have been clever at everything but making and keeping money, and the tiny estate had been lost and won more than once before it finally passed out of their hands. The father of Richard was primarily installed as the miller’s tenant, on whose

death in 1868 it came with certain burdens into his possession. Farmer Iden in *Amaryllis* is a portrait of him, and the whole picture of the household borders sadly on fact. Too frequently one meets and loves and pities similar unfortunates. In their case the magic of the fields is a cruel and wicked witchcraft, with evil spell forcing them to toil. The observing, thoughtful, clever man, who planted his potatoes on philosophic principles, but had no taste for buying or selling or saving, was out of his element. A small farmer who would succeed must be as acute on the marketplace as a Yorkshire tyke, as 'grippy' as a French peasant proprietor. But the elder Jefferies had no gifts in this direction, and while debt and difficulty accumulated he had only the rude resource of labouring on the soil with the energy of despair.

How the man had lost heart in the weary hopeless struggle was visible enough on the entry of his successor. Any casual passer-by might have guessed the state of affairs, for pecuniary difficulty paralyses energy as nothing else does, and the place had all the wild neglected look you find in some of the homesteads of thriftless Ireland. The thatch was full of holes, and green with sprouting wheat, so that it had to be torn off as useless and replaced with slate. No modern improvement had been introduced into the house, not even a grate to the kitchen, at whose open hearth the kettle used to be boiled over a blazing fagot. The garden had been allowed to relapse into a state of nature. Jefferies' father had a passion for hiding his house in trees, but the young saplings had never known the pruning-knife. Other evidence there was in abundance of the bitter sadness with which he left the old home, loved by the reserved and quiet man as none but himself fully knew. The common country-people in the neighbourhood never penetrated the mask under which a sensitive but kind and winning nature was concealed. But they felt he was not like themselves. He was often seen wandering in the fields by dusk and starlight, or setting off to Swindon at moonrise, while in the other houses all but the good man lingering over his last pipe had gone to bed. Had he only known how to buy and sell to advantage, how to raise stock and swell his banking account, the field-lore he had collected by long observation would have been a title to respect; in one constantly struggling with debt and difficulties, who dressed in any kind of coat, and who was no hand at a bargain, his curious theories and strange ways were contemptuously regarded as only the silly whims and eccentricities of a good-for-nothing. Whenever the weather failed as a topic of conversation, the peculiarities of the Jefferies formed an alternative subject for the gossip of the country-folk. And he, feeling all this, gave way more and more to the reserve he handed down to his son.

Yet you feel in all the semi-autobiographical work of Richard that his father's was the prevailing influence. Mrs. Jefferies was never quite the same after the sad death of her first girl, killed, while quite a baby, by a runaway horse in front of the windows. Her successor at the farm related a pathetic little incident to

me, of her lifting the latch of the garden gate, but refusing to enter the old grounds, many years after she had left. One may fancy the crowd of tender and painful, of loving and sad, recollections associated with walls every one of which had rung to the laughter of her children, of spots each vivid with a vision of their playing. He who has seen the lady of his early love the happy wife of another may alone realise it. For the objects of home are loved with almost a personal affection. Below the mulberry-tree which inspired one of Richard's earliest attempts at verse, other boys and girls rim and laugh, while he who sang thus is at rest:

Oh mulberry-tree, oh mulberry-tree,
Dear are thy spreading boughs to me;
Beneath their cool and friendly shade
My earliest childhood laughed and played,
Or, lips all stained with rich red fruit,
Slept in the long grass at thy root.

And now, like an untrue love, it forgetfully yields to the endearment of others. So, too, the summer-house is there, and the swing, his study window looking to the Swindon valley, the gateway leading to the pond, apple and walnut and pear tree, the very musk thrusting its leaves up between the stones—*sunt lachrymoe rerum!* If it were beyond his imagination on his deathbed to conceive 'how they manage, bird and flower, without me, to keep the calendar for them—for I noted it so carefully and lovingly, day by day,' how much more difficult to realise that the intimate and familiar treasures of generations of Jefferies are now forming the memories of alien children!

These facts help us to picture the household into which he was born. We may guess that where care was, and the shadow of advancing ruin, bitterness and irritation were also present. Nor is it credible that amid the tumbledown fortunes of the house the children were trained as lovingly and carefully as they might have been under happier circumstances. Yet there was tenderness and to spare, and when the father led his boys to look at the first sky-blue eggs in the sprouting hedge, and taught them to find and name summer's wild flowers and autumn's red berries, he was doing more than is in the power of any school-master. Their companions still remember the truant-playing propensities of the children, but they had no desire to escape his instructions. To them Richard probably owed the inborn love of reading that partially counteracted the neglect of set tasks. And the paternal influence was reinforced by that of the aunt at Sydenham with whom he was frequently sent to stay.

His true school lay around Coate, and every reader of his works is familiar with it, for the mind of no poet ever clung to the early homestead more tenaciously than his. To his dying day, and through all the horrors of his terrible illness, everything else was external to the world of his childhood. The wooded coves and margining oaks of the lake in which he and his brother launched a

canoe of their own making, the hatch where at peril of their lives they sat to view the brook's barred pike and red-finned perch (now the wonder of a new generation's youthful eyes!), the hazel copses where they nattered and black-berried, all the wide fields over which they roamed, were to the last fresh and green in his memory. The idle do-nothing hours, when Richard lay in the sun, or scampered and romped with his companions, were those that were the making of him. It was then he acquired the wood-magic that enabled him to interpret the wild bird's song, and familiarised him with the weasel's cunning, and the wiles of rat and fox. He made stories for the timid and gentle hare, that, save in dead winter, when there is no other harbourage, avoided the woods as carefully as the rich traveller avoided Epping Forest in the days of Dick Turpin; what the brook sings to the rushes, what the bee hums to the flowers, were the dreams of his solitary hours. And even in manhood he retained all a child's surprised delight at the sight of a magpie's odd gestures, the flashing plumage of jays quarrelling under an oak-tree, or the autumnal parliament of rooks. In frequent times of solitude he learned to love before he had quite come to understand the cooing and warbling and chirping, the pretty quarrelling, of the birds, and the discord of shrieks that arises when thrush and blackbird and finch are alarmed by the visit of a wandering cat, or unite to repel the invasion of a predatory hawk.

Oftenest, however, as he grew up, he chose for his wandering the bare green Downs, where no one was to be met save the shepherd, and the rolling monotony is broken only by follies or small clumps of trees. There he sat and wondered how the kestrels climbed the air, how they could hang so motionless midway between the blue and green, where they flew to when, mounting high with strong and steady wing, they fared off swift and straight into the immeasurable distance. But he had almost an equal delight in the butterflies playing on the breeze that sighed round the buxom hill or swished in the hollows. He had an intense degree the Nature-lover's delight in the wind. Its moaning and whistling in the bare winter woods, the soft rustle of its play with the nodding corn or the foliage in harvest, its autumn lament as it plays huntsman to the chasing leaves, or bellies the elm standing like a draperied woman with her back to it, or blows tempestuously over reddening thicket and thinning hedgerow, were music and poetry to him. Among these Wiltshire Downs, too, the Romans have left many traces of their camps and trenches and ditches, and it was hardly possible that a reading and contemplative boy should play in the antique fosse and climb the mounds of it without picturing to himself the life of long ago. He was the more likely to do this, because that part of Wiltshire is not rich in those memorials of more recent strife you find so plentifully on the Borderland. From the base of the Downs it is a rich alluvial land of fat farms and neatly thatched cottages that stretches away. There is a poverty of ivied ruin and keep, such as might have filled his mind with romance

and inspiration no equal to which was to be derived from the grassy mounds telling where Roman legions had fortified themselves against the tattooed Britons, although it was no unpleasant exercise to recall the uncultivated land, to re-people the deep forest with inhabitants, and to bring back the horse and foot of Cæsar.

Richard's inborn love of solitary musing was strengthened and developed by circumstances. As he grew up he began to find that he was happiest apart from companions. Like all country boys, those of the hamlet delighted in physical contest. The swiftest and strongest among them was their hero. Now, he could invent and tell a blood-curdling story, or he could even walk a long distance, and, like Wordsworth, he was an excellent skater; but in running, jumping, wrestling, and other athletic exercises, he was easily beaten. What is worse, he was of a proud, sensitive temper, and the loud laugh and rough jeer flung at the defeated, little as a boy of coarser mould would have heeded them, galled and hurt him till he braved the charge of cowardice by staying away from their mock battles. 'Their imputations,' he says in a semi-autobiographical chapter, 'stung him deeply, driving him to brood within himself.' The clouds that for ever hung over Coate lessened its attractions into conspicuous inequality with those of the meadows.

The prospect of using a gun was the opening of a new world to him. Yet I do not think he ever was a very keen or accomplished sportsman. When in later life he missed the chance of writing that book on Shooting asked from him by Mr. Charles Longman, the obstacle was probably his consciousness that he lacked experience. Mr. Besant cites the incident as illustrating his argument that 'Jefferies could never do anything which did not spring from his own brain.' But where was the lad to obtain material? I never heard that the gentlemen of Wiltshire asked him to their shooting parties, and it is doubtful if ever he fired a shot in a drive or *battue*. Nor is it likely that he, who in his most prosperous days could not muster funds to buy Sowerby's *English Wild Flowers*, could at any time have indulged a fancy for fashionable and expensive breechloaders. Besides, his writing on Sport is that of a vigilant observer, not of an enthusiastic maker of big bags. His practice was limited to the rabbits on his father's farm, with an occasional excursion to the neighbouring meadows. Nor must the *Amateur Poacher* be taken too seriously. I am told by an old companion that he and his brother used sometimes to find pocket-money by selling rabbits to old Job Brown—mentioned in 'My Old Village' with a realistic touch—instead of bringing them home to the family pot, but never on any extensive scale. What he learned of true sport appears to have come mainly from a neighbouring gamekeeper, his friendship for whom accounts for more than one thing in his story.

It is a common practice for lads in his station of life, whether they are born sportsmen or not, to cultivate the acquaintance of the keeper. Of all rural

occupations his is the most interesting, and every walk with him must have been to Jefferies a lesson in natural history. A keeper is always glad to have a quiet intelligent boy in his company, one with a keen eye for the bolt-holes, and a quick ear to catch the sound of a struggling rabbit in ferreting,—who likes nothing better than to look at a gin or snare, or hold a dog, carry a gun, climb a tree, or perform any other little duty incidental to his task.

In Jefferies' fine description of a burrow as an ear, or 'lug,' as King James called his contrivance for acting eavesdropper to his prisoners, you have a fancy that probably came during his wary and silent waiting by the ferreted burrow; and indeed the keeper has hardly a duty that would fail to interest the nature-loving boy. We can imagine the two walking along the headlands, or lounging through the wood, now halting to drop a jay or a magpie from its nest in the thicket, or noting to what new earth the vixen had transported her family, or resting quietly in broomy corners or sunny dyke-backs, while wild things, unwitting and fearless, crept forth from their holes. And that Jefferies freely asked, and was answered, why and how one animal was killed and another allowed to escape, plainly appears from his work.

For us who look back, the life he led at this time seems almost ideally happy. So it did to himself as his childhood receded into distance. But in retrospection it is usual to forget half of the facts. Is the period remembered by one dark spot?—that spot widens like the storm-cloud, that, beginning no bigger than a man's hand, grows and darkens till all the sky is covered. Is it remembered for something sunny?—as we grow older it shows all blue and sunshine, for the clouds that were there fade away and disappear. What Jefferies in after life considered trivial and forgettable troubles were real enough while they lasted. And there is evidence and to spare that his sensitive nature winced under the trials of childhood. Not only did his figure and weakness feed the scorn of his companions, but they were exaggerated by faults and peculiarities of dress due to scarcity of money at the farm. As soon as Jefferies could afford it he clothed himself as much like other people as possible, and it is known that his nature was sensitive to the ridicule provoked by what was mistaken for the unkempt eccentricity, but was in reality the poverty, of his early years. His dislike of going to school, and, still more, his running away, proves as much. He was just sixteen when he and a companion formed a singular project of walking across Europe to Moscow, and, but that their money ran short, there never would have been any *Gamekeeper at Home*. And that adventure does not speak to his having felt much happiness at Coate.

His poaching, which perhaps accounts for the funds for this journey, was a result of shortness of cash. Every intelligent boy needs money, and Richard shrank from no legitimate means of satisfying his necessities. I say legitimate, not in defence of poaching, but because in him it was hardly an offence. When a couple of boys, instead of going to the school for which with wallet and satchel

they set out, turn aside to the fields, what do they find to do there? The main idea is to catch or kill something. At first nature and accident provide an abundance of game. It is sport enough to creep softly behind an inexperienced young thrush and pass a stealthy hand over him, to hunt half-fledged linnet or robin from bush to bush, to steal between a young rabbit and its burrow, or chase a leveret on the grass, and guddle trout in the stony brook. Rambles across country produce still richer adventures. Winged rooks and wounded pigeons after escaping the gunner lead a skulking life in thick hedgerows and plantations; sometimes even a hawk, a jay, a magpie, or an owl, may thus be taken. But in a while the developing hunter longs for a weapon; and Jefferies and his brother exhausted their ingenuity in a progress from the primitive stick and stone to firearms. The summer-house that still stands in the garden was their armoury. After the period when sling and catapult no longer satisfy the vaulting ambition of childhood, with teacups and hazel-rods and melted lead they made themselves 'squailers'; they cut the tough brier to fashion bow and arrow; and then they tried their first experiments with gunpowder, delighted at first merely to produce an explosion. In all this there was nothing beyond the ordinary experience of a hamlet boy. But the need of money drove Richard onward to new discoveries. Not only were materials required for the experiments: an equal craving of another kind had sprung up, and demanded to be satisfied. He had devoured the contents of his father's bookcase, and now he wanted to borrow and buy. So the result was that when he could set an effective snare, and use a gun to purpose, he got into the habit of selling a portion of his spoil to Job Brown.

As the novelty wore off, however, the hunter's delight in circumvention and death grew less, and the more refined pleasure of watching and noting increased, till at last the only use of his gun was to lend interest to what otherwise would have been an aimless saunter in the fields. When once he had learned the fair and unfair methods of angling, when he could use the rod and the wire with dexterity, he ceased to care for the pursuit. You do not find that in the illness and despair of his after-life he mourned lost opportunities of sport, or looked back with regret to happy days of successful shooting. It was the hours of still enjoyment, of calm, unconscious observation, that he lived again most lovingly. He was at his best in describing the myriad-shaped life of summer, when the implements of death are laid aside, and not autumn, when dogs are exploring the thicket and the brown woods are rustled by beaters. It is important to note this, because an entire misapprehension of his character has been founded on the assumption that he was a Leatherstocking of the English shires or a half-developed Nimrod. No theory could be more fallacious. He writes neither of dogs nor game, neither of guns nor coverts, as one who was above all a sportsman. The part acted by sport in his life was that in these early years it supplied him with a new inducement to be abroad, and stimulated him

to a closer study of wild life. It also prevented him from feeling so keenly as he might otherwise have done the deep vexations of juvenile penury. That too was now beginning to play its part in urging him to activity in the battle of life.

The son of poor parents, be he ambitious or contented, lazy or energetic, finds it necessary at an early age to do something for his living, and the shrewd country-folk hastened Jefferies to a decision by showing a certain contempt for his agricultural accomplishments. Long after his name was famous as a writer, the be-smocked village patriarch remembers him 'nowt o' a farmer' and 'a lazy lout on the land'; and there was one who used to tell with pride how he had openly rebuked the indolent loafer. To the staid bucolic mind the lad was a puzzle and a scandal. 'When I try to describe these things to them,' he wrote in one of his latest essays, 'they look at me with stolid incredulity.' In good sooth, when a young man talked to them of 'white clouds in blue summer skies,' and did not refer to the weather, when he idled away hours in mere enjoyment of the sunshine and raved about a sparkle on the brook, a music at the hatch, a glow and a glory of night, the steady-going countryman shook his wise pate, and, nodding to his neighbour, thought it a pity the youth's upper story was going. 'See'd ye ow't on the Downs?' one would ask as dusk was settling down on the grey hills, and 'Nobbut Dick Jefferies moonin' about,' would be replied. Some thought him incorrigibly lazy, and told him so; others reckoned him half-cracked and pitied his family. And there was that in his appearance to strengthen the latter opinion. Carefulness in dress was not a highly prized virtue at Coate, and Richard at that time, with his unshorn and unkempt locks, and his untidy and badly preserved clothes hung on a lamp-post of a body, was the picture of a sloven. In later life he had quite conquered this bad habit of his youth, thus making the inference a safe one that his appearance as a boy was the result of the free-and-easy style of living at Coate. His general aspect was such as to exaggerate eccentricity in dress. He was overgrown and unhealthy, tall and thin and bent, and he shared with his brother the peculiarity of holding his head very much to one side, and his full and bright blue eyes peered so vacantly through the half-closed eyelids that a familiar friend might pass him half-a-dozen times and not be seen, and at the seventh might be greeted only with a distant nod. In thought or dream or reverie, the boy was often miles away from his close companion.

There was no one to guide or help him, and so his budding and uninformed ambition soon landed him in one of the very worst places for it, viz. the office of a country newspaper. It had the solitary advantage of leading towards literature by a path whereon life could be supported during the journey. His early desire, however, was not literary fame, but the very much humbler one of earning a little money. I have been told by one of his editors that he never made himself a proficient, far less an adept, at writing shorthand; he never learned more than barely sufficed for ordinary work: a convincing proof, in a man of his strong will

and tenacity, that he did not aim at making journalism more than a stepping-stone. A country reporter in a lively district such as Swindon, if he be clever at his work and enterprising, may easily earn a respectable income at a very early period of his life; for not only has he his weekly wage, but there are many little ways of augmenting it. There are news agencies that need correspondents, and local newspapers glad of paragraphs.

But success is the reward of qualities exactly the opposite of those possessed by Jefferies. The ideal reporter for a country paper is a brisk, impudent, flattering, chaffing, good humoured youth, who has not the most remote sense of personal dignity or consciousness of superiority. He starts off in the morning as trig and neat as a city clerk, drops into a favourite tobacconist's shop, and over a penny cigarette flirts with the girl at the counter till useful customers whom he can fish for a paragraph come in; then he turns to a taproom where he knows one or two local magnates take their 'morning'; he has his associates at the political club, the attendants at the hospital are his friends, and he never misses an opportunity of treating a policeman. He will make an immense fuss about describing a tradesman's improvements, and then beg an advertisement from him. Among the guardians and at the Town Council meetings he has confidential friends. There is, in a word, hardly a possibility of anything happening without his knowledge. In the office itself there is no end to his zeal and usefulness. He is sub-editor and reader, paragraphist, leader-writer, anything and everything that the occasion may require. One day he toils like a slave, on another he idles like a loafer. Always is he greedy of an excuse to make copy.

How was the shy, dreaming, solitude-loving boy from the farm to fill a position such as this? The training he had received for it was the worst possible. At Coate, where no man was called master, independence was in the very air, and neither Richard Jefferies nor his father was likely to feel himself inferior before the drapers and grocers of Swindon. Nowhere, in fact, does a feeling of mental superiority grow more swiftly than in the country; as nowhere does stupidity more swiftly become more stupid. It was soon a complaint made against the young reporter that he had no proper sense of his own position. He could neither fawn nor coax nor flatter. Instead of asking as a favour for information, he demanded it so imperiously as to have made legends in Swindon of his extraordinary impudence.

Nor could any sense of his own subordinate position restrain him from an unrestricted exercise of his own judgment. If sent to report the speeches of the little great men of the neighbourhood, he thought nothing of refusing to do so on what editors thought the fantastic ground that they were 'infernal rot.' In a quiet hamlet the thoughtful man never learns the chatter, the pleasant meaningless small talk, of the town. Jefferies was not fond of speaking unless he had something definite to say, and as every word of his own had a meaning, he

commonly attached far more than its due importance to the idle conversation of others. And he had the additional misfortune of being constitutionally destitute of humour. Scarcely in his writing is there to be found even the feeblest glimmer of laughter, and no one remembers of his having ever made a joke. On the sort of day he esteemed most perfect—a morning of warm sunshine in spring, when the tender grass is first shooting up through its withered bed, and the scent of the budding oaks is in the lanes—his enjoyment still remained serious; he did not experience the exuberant overflow of spirit that blithens the ploughboy's whistle, and makes the shy milkmaid, she knows not why, laugh with the ploughman. He drank in beauty and enjoyment as silently as a tree or a flower. And this extreme seriousness of temperament was a drawback where flippancy and brightness are the highest virtues.

The early literary adventures of Jefferies are those of an unworldly dreamer, of a greenhorn, the smart successful townsman would say. In his position a clever lad with the mark of success on his forehead would have laid the foundation of a fortune. Undistracted by any vision of higher things, he would have reported and paragraphed without wasting a thought on anything above or beyond perfecting himself in his task, and preparing for the better situation that would be his assured reward. And the world always looks on approvingly at the smug and respectable career of talented mediocrity.

It is otherwise with the boy who has thrilled to the magic of the fields, who has communed with nature on the lonely hills and by the singing rivulet, and whose musings have been lit up by the genius of every author he could lay hands on. Hours like these nurse ideals and ambitions, and mother strange dreams that keep him far away from the political meetings and cases of petty larceny and the county court broils on which the attention of the other is concentrated. And thus in the performance of every-day tasks the man of genius is too frequently beaten and distanced by the common-place matter-of-fact craftsman. Yet he feels big with a secret; he walks with the consciousness that one day he will achieve something to altogether dwarf the poor doings of his rivals. Jefferies not only had that feeling, he was able to impress it on all with whom he came in contact. His family felt that he had a future, and even the provincial editors for whom he worked, though they had cause to complain of his work, felt that there was something in him if he could get it out.

But here lay the difficulty of the untrained lad. He had many a bitter experience to undergo before learning that a treasure-house of beautiful thought is unsaleable on the marketplace until the owner has acquired the gift of appropriate expression. And in this respect literature is a trap to the unwary. No born genius of a painter or a sculptor would hope to embody his conceptions in artistic form until by a laborious apprenticeship he had learned to handle the chisel or brush. In writing no such technical difficulties are apparent. With paper, ink, and an unlimited supply of ideas, it seems so easy to

sit down and compose a masterpiece. It was many a day before Jefferies overcame this delusion. There was something in his mental constitution that blinded him to it. To the end of his life his finest thoughts and fancies centred upon the commonest objects. It was neither by his additions to our knowledge nor the profundity of his thought that he won his place, but by the vividness of his literary pictures. The charm of his writing lies in its illusion. By the spell of his imagination he gathers the Wiltshire fields into every room where he is read.

At first, however, his capital was only this fund of common knowledge. Underlying it was a rich but still unmined seam of gold. What is probably the very first of his unpublished works still exists in manuscript in the possession of Mr. Harmer, editor of the Cirencester paper to which, after a round of magazines, it was sent. The title is *A True Tale of the Wiltshire Labourer*, and the book is a realistic, almost Zolaesque, transcript of life at Coate. Probably he chose the theme for its simplicity, and because it lay within the range of his knowledge. Not yet was he alive to the overwhelming difficulty of the task. I question if there is among all the skilled novelists of our time one who could compel a wide circle of readers to be interested in characters so humble, in scenes so limited and sordid. One remembers Sir Walter's saying, 'Ay, ay; if one could but look into the heart of that little cluster of cottages, no fear but you would find materials enow for tragedy as well as comedy.' Human life is the same among the Wiltshire Downs as under the shadows of Eildon, but the attendant spirit of Jefferies was no Asmodeus, and, so to speak, he failed to lift the thatch from any of the cosy huts nestling lonely in dales by the rivulets that wander through his childhood's fields. Burns and Crabbe could make the peasant interesting on his own account, but your modern novelist uses him only as a foil to wealth and refinement. Jefferies began by trying to present him with unimaginative realism, and without poetic insight.

Human nature to the very last was a sealed book to him. It is between laughter and tears that we watch the immense literary activity of these years, inspired as it was by the same sanguine hopes, the same incapacity for practical affairs, that were exemplified in his father. The latter trusted the retrieval of misfortunes to strenuous manual labour, the former to incessant quill-driving. No man ever worked more blindly than Richard now was doing. He was not an excellent reporter, but that did not prevent him from writing a guide for others; he was as full of projects as the wizard in his most active period—not one bore the impress of shrewd self-interest. Histories of Swindon and the Goddards, impossible stories, imperfectly understood antiquities and legends, furnished him with tasks that proved mere outlets for energy.

Two things he had to learn: first, what he could write about, and, secondly, how to write it. Without style his knowledge was useless, because it was not special. Naturalists had already enumerated more facts about out-of-door life

than he was master of. He was ultimately to succeed by investing homely things with charm, and he did not yet know what he lacked. It was surprising to him that a story knocked off in a fortnight or three weeks did not fill his coffers. Yet in this unconsciousness lay his salvation, for it kept him from the fate of those feverish modern writers who go forth in search of 'style' and return with bags full of dainty phrases and curious nouns and adjectives of another world. Those affectations, useful as they are to him who has nothing to say, and whose 'art' is that of concealing intellectual barrenness or counterfeiting literature with lanalitt, would have been fatal to Jefferies. His business was not to trick out common-place into a semblance of originality, but to reproduce for us some of the delicate and sweet delight afforded him by the simple sights and sounds of an English field. Pleasure, emotion, pain are the basis of literature, and literary art is the ability so to image one's own experience that the reader lives over again that portion of the author's life. Jefferies was no introspective analyst. With the ingenuous simplicity of a child he tells you a mallard was swimming on the lake, or a bee humming in the flowers, and you know he was pleased, and you feel as pleased yourself as if you had been with him; yet there is so little ornament it seems almost as though his writing carried conviction only by something akin to the frank sincerity of a young voice.

That is style at its highest, and it was growing in Jefferies at Swindon, but as invisibly as the Lent lily when it is pushing its way through mould and snow to meet the April sunshine. He wrote novels that publishers returned, printed books that did not pay, pursued a journalism that would not smile, and by these very hardships the circle of his activity was being narrowed to the one territory where he was master. Yet we cannot but take blame to ourselves for the excessive cruelty of his training. It almost seems as if, despite all the scoldings of all our teachers, from Samuel Johnson to Carlyle, strikingly original genius must still be prepared for the hardships meted out to a Burns or a Blake. Yet fame comes easily in these days to men of ordinary talent. If you are clever, but not too clever, if you confine your originality to conventional forms, your recognition will be instant. Jefferies established a convention. Many men are now able to make more than he did by weakly imitating his work. He won friendship and recognition and sympathy from a few individuals, but the great crowd of spectators held their thumbs down till he was killed, and then shed the tear of sentiment over his grave. But that is anticipating.

His career at Swindon was in its eager life, its impulsive mistakes, its successes and adventures, worthy of the most erratic genius whose story is told in the annals of literature. As we have seen, he had in a wild moment been a runaway from Coate. He was now to be smitten with disease, to lose employment, to be threatened with an action for debt, and to be stricken with poverty so dire that only a halfpenny remained in his purse before he was permitted to score at all in his contest with misfortune. Even in mishap,

however, there was teaching and consolation. The cottagers whom he never could understand came in his illness with honey and presents, showing, if he could have seen, how no malice had edged their rough jesting about him. And he made the discovery that 'after all, books are dead; they should not be our whole study. Too much study is selfish.' That was the beginning of his emancipation, for he was to be no mere critic living on the fame of others, but one whose work was to be a record of his own experience.

For some time yet he was to flounder after many will-o'-the-wisps. Mr. Besant says in 1870, the year of the Franco-Prussian war, he had money enough to take a continental holiday, but the adventure reads almost like a repetition of his earlier escapade. It could never have occurred to any one but a child of nature. At Hastings he writes verses to the exiled Prince Imperial, and is sky-high at their being accepted. We hear of him admiring the women and the wine of Brussels; and such is his eager enjoyment, we may not suspect the truth that the whole of his money is melting away. Nay, more, he had left without warning, and found himself, when he came back to Coate, like an escaped canary that after an hour's freedom among the apple-trees flies back to its cage when hungry; his father's door was closed to him, and the newspaper offices refused him admittance. First there was only two and threepence in his pocket, then only a half-penny, and how quiet and penitent he was after his escapade will appear from the following letter kindly placed in my hands by Mr. Harmer of Cirencester, to whom it was addressed:

COATE, December 15th, 1870.

DEAR SIR, I did not expect so kind an answer as you sent me. I wish now I had written long before. I have been engaged almost all the year trying to make some progress as an author. In the last four months I have been occupied writing a book, which Mr. Disraeli was good enough to say was on an interesting subject, and to recommend me to send it to some publisher. So Messrs. Smith, Elder and Co. are now considering the manuscript. I find, however, that it is better to have some permanent employment while making these efforts, and lately I have done some little reporting; indeed, with a view to such work in the future, I have carefully kept up my short-hand. I have been thinking of taking a regular situation with the new year, and, before I apply elsewhere, I should much like to know if there is any possibility of doing anything for you. The kind tone of your letter reminds me that you were a most considerate employer, and if the salary you can give me is not large, on the other hand the work is not excessive, and there is time at one's disposal. I frankly confess that I should much like my old place again, and that it would be a considerable advantage to me. I would endeavour to give satisfaction, and I think I may say I tried to suit you while with you. I know the neighbourhood thoroughly. Perhaps you will at least take the idea into consideration before replying. I am aware that what has passed is a great obstacle, but it is certain that the knowledge I have gained of the world since then, and the more correct light in

which I now view and value things, is the best guarantee against its recurrence. I have enclosed a few lines of my own for the *Standard*, and remain, yours respectfully, RICHARD JEFFERIES.

The letter from Disraeli alluded to will always be remembered as an example of that strange and brilliant statesman's recognition of merit. One cannot help smiling, however, at the elation of Jefferies over it, and at his ingenuous description of the writer as 'the man who stands highest in our age for intellectual power.' It will be seen that despite his struggles towards authorship the young countryman had imbibed no Carlylean horror of journalism. His life at present is a hard struggle for existence, and 'Any port in a storm' might have been his motto. Yet it would almost appear as if some Muse sister to her who appeared in the auld clay biggin' of Burns was warding him from that fatal morass; or, in the matter-of-fact language of his biographer, 'he was going to make a big mess of two or three jobs before he really found himself.'

The Times, which more than once has distinguished itself by a recognition of obscure merit, was the scene of his first success in the eyes of a world which did not share his own view as to the distinction of becoming known as a writer in both Swindon papers. His letters on the Wiltshire Labourer show his great faculty for noting externals, but in respect to anything else are as unsatisfactory as his novels. The lament over his ineptitude to utilise them as an instrument for widening the cleft in his oyster of a world is I think misplaced. In his boyish inexperience he had told reporters to 'treat literature as a trade which, like other trades, requires an immense amount of advertising,' but no one shrank more fastidiously than he did from the methods of the literary charlatan. Besides, the unshaken trust in himself that persisted through all his early troubles was not founded on the hope of rising from one point to another in journalism, but in a belief in his capacity for accomplishing more enduring work.

Instead of swelling the noise with puffery, according to the terms of his own prescription—dictated less by conviction than contempt, I fancy—he went quietly about his work, thinking, in his inexperience perhaps, that from this test of his quality others would guess the power of which he was conscious. He did not know how the world's dulness is most dense in the presence of promise; that while the abject penny-a-liner is paid and flattered into quackery, the solid work of great talent is oftenest ignored, and stupidity stands amazed or impudently jeering before those resplendent streaks that show in the worst bunglings of genius.

Whatever kept Jefferies in Coate, however, was for his intellectual and physical good. His courtship had been going on for some time, and now (1874) ended in marriage. From the neighbouring farm he took to the old home at Coate an early playmate and a sympathetic companion. A time was approaching when his last farewell would be paid to it. Every month of delay was so much

more won to the making of him. His good genius was gradually elbowing him away from those journalistic duties of the reporter that might eventually have made a hack or a tradesman of him. The local paper indeed helped on his development, for your county weekly, when it suffers from lack of matter, is a great encourager of the descriptive article.

Many people in North Wiltshire date their remembrance of Jefferies from a series of essays on Village Churches, for the writing of which he perambulated the district, and there is enduring work of his to show how deep were the impressions made. It was in autumn, for the green yew showed its red berries through the window, and though he does not mention Chiseldon by name, one cannot, without thinking of its grey and gargoyled church, read what he has to say of the elms and beeches and the steep down, grey-mottled with sheep. Though he had visited many another, it is highly characteristic that the church from which he had walked with his sweetheart on Sunday evenings, and close to the door of which is the sleeping-place of his forefathers, should have been most conspicuously present in his mind. Now, too, he was beginning to practise his craft with power no longer dashing off novels at railway speed, and feeling astonished that they did not sell, but slowly and carefully working at those shorter and less ambitious efforts on which ultimately his fame was to rest. It was by no deliberate choice he did so. Writers fortunately raised above pecuniary cares are at liberty to select their own ground. By examining the causes of failure, and with leisurely determination rectifying them, they have a chance of proving the accuracy of their self-knowledge. A man continually dogged by want, with the needs of a wife and children to attend to, must push as best he may along the line of least resistance. Jefferies wanted to write novels, but was forced to write essays. Mr. Walter Besant and others have, as I think unreasonably, ridiculed his ambition. They forget that his was a slowly maturing mind, and his early experience narrow. Scott, Fielding, Thackeray—how many novelists there have been whose success began at middle age!—and certainly had the author of *Tom Jones* left nothing but his plays as little promise would have been discerned in them as in *The Scarlet Shawl*. A man knows himself best, and who can say that had Jefferies lived he might not have succeeded in romance? At forty, says M. Kenan, is time enough for a man's writing to begin, and Jefferies died at thirty-eight. There was, as far as I can see, only one difficult obstacle in his way, and contemporary successes show that even it is no barrier to money-making by romance. Almost all stories of the first rank are full of humour. *Don Quixote* and *Gil Bias*, *Tom Jones* and *The Antiquary*, *Pendennis* and (may I add?) *The Master of Ballantrae*, are tinged with it. No man indeed seems to see life clearly unless he perceives, not only its drolleries and oddities and contradictions, but that not infrequently tears are stemmed by laughter and tragedy transposed into comedy. Jefferies did not inherit this corrective of over-seriousness, and it is not to be acquired.

On the other hand, his slightest sketches of human beings—the farmers, poachers, gamekeepers, and labourers introduced into his later works—are drawn with the same minute fidelity as his birds and plants, his talent in that respect reminding one forcibly of the better part of Emile Zola. The point is of importance, because Jefferies himself was never quite satisfied—nor are his readers—with the form circumstances obliged him to adopt. Some critics have expressed this dissatisfaction by inveighing against his tendency to catalogue, and declaring that he never rose above being a reporter. But this is a mere fumbling for the name and explanation of a fault. Obviously the sort of work done by Jefferies at Swindon, or that done by any man in his position, was a great deal more likely to develop word-spinning than catalogue, and of all the terms applicable to the defect catalogue is the least appropriate. Any ordinarily expert naturalist, set in a sunny field with pencil and notebook, could observe and make a list equal, as a list, to any of his; for he saw nothing that was not patent to every open eye. You may test the truth of that in many ways. Do you go to him or to more commonplace authors when it is desirable to obtain information or to clear up a disputed point in natural history? If his more ecstatic admirers are right, and the closeness of his observation be the crowning point of his virtues, where is the fruit of it? What has he added to this branch of science? After being neglected in his lifetime it would appear to be his fate to be misunderstood and misinterpreted now that he is dead.

His mind was of too musing and contemplative an order for him to shine with extraordinary brilliance as a mere collector of facts. The field-naturalist lives in dread lest his intellect should lose the edge of its activity. His aim is to be constantly alert, active, vigilant; if wise, he will not even smoke at his task, lest he be lulled into dream and reflection when he should only see. Jefferies to the verge of indolence was still and meditative. For his walks he did not prefer the hedgerows, meadows, and woods, teeming with life, but the bare and open downs, where the only music was made by the wind moaning through the Follies or sighing in the hollows; where a hovering kestrel or a hare limping round the shoulder of a hill were intruders in a scene otherwise empty save for the clouds whose drifting beauty was more than scientific fact to him. We hear nothing of his making botanical or other collections, though both his father and grandfather appear to have done so; of his experimenting, otherwise than as to the most effective methods of killing game. If he had a passion for information it found extremely little expression by the usual channels.

Others name him Nature's prose-poet, and in safe generalities talk of the 'interest' and 'charm' of his writings, and they certainly are happier than those who denominate him a maker of catalogues. Mr. Besant, I think, in his *Eulogy* slurs over his verse. 'I wonder', he says, 'what that manuscript (his first) was. Perhaps poetry—a clever lad's first attempt at verse; there is never a clever lad who does not try his hand at verse.' Jefferies did write poetry, and showed

promise of succeeding with it, as much promise as you shall find in the *Hours of Idleness* or the first crude flights of Lord Tennyson.

The peculiar merit of his prose never will be understood unless we clearly apprehend the central fact by which the magician of the fields dominated him. It was not sport, although he knew the charm of gun and rod; it was not science, much as his intellect soared and speculated. What it was he has told us himself: 'I seem as if I could feel all the glowing life the sunshine gives and the south wind calls to being. The endless grass, the endless leaves, the immense strength of the oak expanding, the unalloyed joy of finch and blackbird: from all of these I receive a little; each gives me something of the pure joy they gather for themselves. In the blackbird's melody one note is mine; in the dance of the leaf-shadows the formed maze is for me though the motion is theirs; the flowers with a thousand faces have collected the kisses of the morning. Feeling with them, I receive some at least of their fulness of life.'

Busy, striving, struggling, toiling, weary men seek Nature for solace and rest, but no sooner is her invigorating influence felt than they begin to desire a return to labour. Sportsman, philosopher, student, court her for ulterior motives. Jefferies was her disinterested lover. It was enough for him simply to live in sun and wind, and feel that he was one with the blowing, moving life around him, with bursting leaf and running beast. 'The hours when the mind is absorbed by beauty are the only hours in which we really live,' and in those hours when he was held as by a spell Nature poured her images into his rich and sensuous mind. She was most prodigal and he most receptive during those happy days at Coate before he dreamed of selling this experience for bread.

In this sordid and care-stricken world not many people are capable of so detaching themselves from worldly affairs as to enter into this joy. 'No one else,' he says, 'seems to have seen the sparkle on the brook, or heard the music at the hatch, or to have felt back through the centuries; and when I try to describe these things to them they look at me with stolid incredulity.' But those who really love and appreciate his work are such as have shared, be it ever so lightly, in the intimate pleasures he has described. They may not know Coate, but memory holds the ripple and glitter of other streams, of sweet and similar music, of youthful thought and feeling gone with the fair sunsets and mysterious dusks visible to the young alone. In reading Jefferies, ghosts of dead pleasures pass in train before us. Once more the greens and yellows are as bright as they appeared to the happy excitement of youth, pictures of living animals glow again, the merry hedgerows, the stiled footpaths across the meadows, banks whereon our wild-flowers grew, early home and heath and garden come back. The very force of the egotism with which his memory recalls and his imagination bodies forth pictures deepens our interest. It is the personal feeling that raises Jefferies so far above all other writers on the open air.

Yet in the heat of our admiration there remains something of that dissatisfaction he felt with his own work, a suspicion that other poets and prose-writers, nay, even the general taste, are right in using material similar to that of Jefferies as border and background only. The exquisitely carved leaves on the walls of Melrose Abbey would not be less beautiful if separated, alike in their environment and the intention of the artist, from that building; and yet who could admire a miscellaneous and unordered heap of sculpture and pilaster, stained glass and woodwork, as much as a cathedral in which each has its well-considered place? An essay by Jefferies is a succession of fine but disconnected pictures, and is without beginning, middle, or end. In bits it is unsurpassable, as a whole it has no interest. One objects to a kind of aimlessness in it, as if the artist had no general impression on his mind. The fault seems to have been one of constitution, for his stories too suffer from the lack of any central idea or skilful grouping. Even in his descriptions he will bring before your mind's eye a single meadow, or hedgerow, or spot on the Downs, but very seldom do his eyes travel on to the wide landscape around. And as one defect leads to another, digression is an almost unavoidable consequence. A novelist eager to get his story told, or an essayist intent upon some broad effect, selects from his material such portions only as bear on his purpose. Jefferies never could withstand the temptation to make parentheses of any quite non-significant facts that occurred to him; and every introduction of this kind made his work less interesting and attractive to the multitude. Those who understand him will not find fault. If Jefferies had been different, more active and practical say, he could not have loitered in the fields so calmly and contentedly while the graving on his mind grew deeper; had he known how to invent plots and weave them into stories he could not have also made the unique addition to English literature we have had from him.

In these days every literary man has sooner or later to face the great battle of London, and Jefferies, as he found himself at last gaining position as a successful magazine writer, yielded to the attraction. It has been plaintively complained that he did so without having mastered the indispensable secret known as 'working the oracle.' Your astute young author of the modern school, and many of his still more astute seniors, have methods of widening reputation not to be learned on the Wiltshire Downs. 'Never miss an opportunity of having your name in the papers' is one of their frankly accepted rules, and as toadies and jackals are plentiful enough their success is wonderful. I would have less respect for Jefferies if he had failed to treat those base and brazen arts with haughty disdain, and it seems to me a lasting disgrace that any reason exists for the complaint of his biographer, that inattention to them was the origin of his pecuniary troubles. It is to our shame, and not his, if the manufacturer of shoddy succeeds with his puffery, and is enriched, while he who sells honestly honest goods is neglected; and the society of authors would perform a

wholesome purgation if it would brand with infamy every member known to pursue the tactics neglected by Jefferies, i.e. every one who 'sought to be mentioned in the papers,' or who 'courted popularity in the ways very well known to all, and commonly practised without concealment.' Then perhaps we should be spared the spectacle of neglected genius dying penniless, while notorious literary mediocrities, quacks, and humbugs, find 'the cheques come rolling in.'

Nor is it to be regretted that Richard Jefferies stood aloof from the literary society of London. It has not improved much since the days when it was an object of Thackeray's mockery and Carlyle's scorn. Most of the men who add enduring books to literature find it safer to avoid the pigmy circles from which coine theories of literary art, doctrines of criticism, and other kinds of din that only confuse a man whose work lies before him. It is just because he had so little theory about his craft, and was so entirely free from the feverish self-consciousness of the typical literary man of to-day that the biography of Jefferies stands out so fresh and beautiful. For he drifted, or was driven by wind and tempest, into his haven. To change the simile what he produced was of the British public's own choosing, the only one of his wares they would buy. If he offered to write them stories, or political economy, or even religion, the answer was, 'No, we will buy little country essays, and write these you must, or starve.' To a man in that position theories of literary art might well appear a mockery.

For the neglect of Jefferies, it was not the critics but the British public itself that was to blame. When the poorly educated, inexperienced countryman was at his best, he addressed the cultured few rather than the unlearned many. To this day those who live among his own fields do not read him. Many reasons might be advanced to account for this; the most obvious of which is his impregnation with the most advanced ideas of his time. At first sight it seems strange that it should be so, and yet it was natural enough. Those writers who live in the heart of the metropolis, and who are the first to know of a new name, or a new theory, whose daily gossip is of this remarkable book, or that striking article, and who are continually discussing realism, romanticism, decadence, all the latest phases of art, are out-distanced by the remote and solitary thinker who reads comparatively little, and talks less, but who with a calm and undistracted mind works out theory and conclusion to their logical results. The energy of the others is wasted on the sifting of news, the collection of facts, and the discussion of side arguments; while a man wandering in the fields carries with him and muses over only a few striking ideas. Jefferies' love of *Faust* would show, if nothing else did, how full he is of the modern spirit. But you see it still more clearly in that treatment of Nature which delights the cultivated man and is caviare to the general. Gilbert White wrote pleasantly upon free wild life, and is perennially popular. Izaak Walton beautifully described still nature, and is loved; but there is something in Jefferies that is not in them, nor in any of his

predecessors. Modern discovery has given Mother Earth a new interest, and his unconvinced mind, reflecting the religious restlessness of his age, grasped it as hardly any other has done. Almost unconsciously to himself, he was ever dwelling on our relationship to drifting cloud, and waving wood, and rippling water. The critics were not always successful in analysing the cause of their admiration, but they were lavish in their praise, and if he had lived only a few years longer, the lagging crowd would have yielded also.

It is therefore difficult to see any benefit arising out of the removal of Jefferies from Coate to Surbiton. At peril of his self-respect, he was debarred from adopting what Mr. Besant, who ought to know, calls the common devices for widening fame. The praise showered upon him would have lost its value if he had been conscious that even the innocent bias of friendship had interfered with the freedom and independence of his critics. He, whose writing seems to come from an atmosphere calm and secluded as that of a woodland glade, could not admit a legion of chattering—say theorists, to his sanctuary. While his health remained, however, he was under no temptation to do this.

The closing chapter in the life of Jefferies will long be told as one of the most heroic incidents in the sad annals of literature. It brought into play features of personal character that hitherto had been clouded. His illness began in December 1881, and endured for more than five years. Until his death actually occurred, the outside world had known less of his personality than that of any contemporary of equal standing. In these times, we have small reason to complain about lack of familiarity with our celebrities. But the gossip, the interviewer, the retailer of tittle-tattle, and the paragraphist told us nothing of Jefferies. Yet his works said plainly that he was passionate, sensuous, and tender, that he loved to loiter, and dream, and theorise, that he had a wild and daring fancy, a bold and speculative mind, and no sense of the grotesque or laughable. Nevertheless, he was so reserved and meditative that his neighbours at Coate were unaware even of that. They did not know him, and he did not know them; as far as he was concerned, they were only 'figures in the landscape,' or, at most, embodiments of life to be observed and described as the birds and beasts were. His imagination never carried him below the exterior of human life. He minutely noted the habits, dress, food, peculiarities of speech, and action of the labourers; he did not surmise how much romance might be in their lives. They were as ignorant of all but the outward figure and clothes of him. The quiet child, the long untidy boy, the idle youth, the apparently lazy young man's figure, slowly moving over field or down by dusk or sunlight, was in each stage something out of sympathy with them, an object of gossiping, scornful pity. They judged by the simple criterion of success. He did not supplement Farmer Iden's lack of agricultural skill, or stay the coming ruin. In his self-chosen calling of reporter he achieved no tangible result. His early attempts at authorship were losing transactions as commerce. At London he did

not make the literary business pay. The sensitive Jefferies knew very well the estimation in which he was held, and had, as he tells us, to endure 'the sneers and bitter taunts of so many for idleness and incapacity,' and the result was that the reserved man became even more reserved, till one of the sweetest and tenderest natures was cloaked and concealed by apparent moroseness and bad temper. Jefferies' innate worth was unknown except to his closest friends and the students of his work. The 'boundless love' that atoned for all the faults of Burns was his too. Indeed, so perfect was this feeling, so complete the sympathy between Jefferies and Nature, that they melt into one, and you do not care to use even the word love, because it implies a distinction. It was not by the penetration of fancy that he interpreted the life of brook and flower, but because he shared it. Sunshine and wind and shower were as much to him as to them.

This kindness was not spoiled by artificial and fine-drawn scruples as to life. He shot a rabbit with as clean a conscience as that of a kestrel hawking a mouse. In a world where life is supported by the destruction of life, his mind was untroubled by those fine sentiments regarding its sacredness which fadmongers have elevated into a creed. In the course of his sporting adventures he sometimes slackened his hold of the sighted gun to admire the beauty of a pheasant or a rabbit's play; but it is as difficult to imagine him losing sport out of a false pity as to think he could ever have been a wanton destroyer. In telling you how most effectually to wring a rabbit's neck, or kill a wounded bird, he takes humanity for granted, and does not insist upon lecturing.

Jefferies I judge, from his writings, to have been a man of almost Quixotic integrity, and it is a quality, as one must sorrowfully admit, that plays into the hands of the third of the giants—disease, despair, and poverty—pitted against him. He who thrives on journals and magazines is much more comfortable without the fine honesty that prevented Jefferies from writing on what was not absolutely within his own knowledge; for it is a craft where payment is calculated on bulk more than quality. A writer in haste to be rich adopts without verification the facts of others, guesses impudently where he is ignorant, trusts to a lucky shot if in doubt, and has the knack of dressing up in several guises every idea that comes off, so that he may multiply his payment for it; and all this, without barefaced plagiarism or imposture. Jefferies would not do that. His very novels are made worse than they might be from his reluctance to pass beyond the mild experience of Coate farm.

To that he joined an unbending independence and pride of spirit so robust and invincible as to recall Samuel Johnson, Carlyle, Burns, and the other indomitable heroes of letters. Of the proud reticence it inspired him with, in regard to his sickness and poverty, of the manner in which it nerved him to labour in the midst of deadly torture, how it urged him, whenever the ebbing tide of health made a fallacious break shore-ward, to gallantly attempt again the

retrieval of his fortunes, future historians will write as they do of Gordon at Khartoum. His resolute statement, made too with a deep and unconscious pathos, that he would sooner go to the workhouse than accept the charity of the Royal Literary Fund, is one of those things we remember with admiration, whether we agree or not with his sentiments in regard to that institution. It is sufficient to know that he honestly believed there was degradation in accepting its aid. Many a day has passed since anything more heroic was chronicled than the stubborn determination of this pained and dying man, not only to fight with his last breath, but to refuse any aid in the struggle that would at all interfere with his own self-respect. And in the quality of the work done in this agony there is the strongest evidence of his force of will. 'The Pageant of Summer', says Mr. Besant, 'was written while he was in deadly pain and torture,' and not only is it admirable throughout, but the closing pages touch the high-water mark of English prose, so perfect are they in style without a trace of gaudy ornament, so rich in the highest qualities of thought, tenderness, pathos, fancy, and speculation. It is only when the mind is excited to the highest degree compatible with controlled work, when every faculty of it is awake and on the outlook, that such writing may be produced. And the essay is not better, if so good, as that final lament over the old village, written when the flame of life was still nearer the socket. I cannot imagine what critics are driving at when, with it before them, they say Jefferies had no style. You will see in many of their own compositions matter and manner coupled like a pair of ill-matched hounds, that snap and snarl and pull in opposite directions till it is painful to watch them. The thought and expression of Jefferies are not coupled; they are fused into one, and inseparable. To so concentrate and apply the faculties of his mind, while all his body was quivering with pain, was a triumph of will such as literature had not displayed since the time of Schiller.

These latest essays I think prove something more. Up to now, Jefferies had been groping and feeling about for a medium through which to express himself. Despite much effort, the novel in his hands had failed; poetry and every other form but one had been given up. The discriminating minority of the reading public had by their encouragement said plainly that in the world of letters one small territory was his, and that there he was without a rival. Practice makes perfect in the literary as in every other art, and every new essay of Jefferies, towards the end of his life, showed some improvement on its predecessors. Crudities disappeared, the digressive tendency was held in check, and ever in brighter and truer colours did the ardent mind reproduce its own reflection of the charming objects whereon it loved to work. At last, the spell-bound boy had emerged from his trance, and seized the magic wand himself. He commands it to be Spring, and lo! a brilliant green comes on the black hedgerows, brown bourgeons of the chestnut smile and burst into leaf, the singing of birds and 'the sweet rush of rain is heard,' and you feel the sun shining after it; let it be

Summer, he says, and the foliage thickens, may and apple blossom whiten the sward, the dense trees and bushes are populous with helpless half-fledged birds, the corn shoots upward and is waved by the wandering breeze; Autumn with its red berries and yellow leaves, its fatness and its decay, its full granaries and bare fields, and icy Winter too, came at his call. No poet, not Burns nor Tennyson, to say nothing of lesser men—Cowper and Thomson for example—has had a greater power; and prose for such a purpose is a coarser instrument than verse, in which the finer shades of meaning may be conveyed by rhyme and rhythm as well as the melody of words.

Experience had shown however that beyond this power something else is necessary. It is curious that those who are most insistent on the sufficiency of mere colour in paint, of style in letters, should have been promptest to condemn Jefferies as a cataloguer who could not generalise. And if you study their criticisms it will become abundantly apparent that they conjure up ninety-nine faults that do not exist, and miss the only one, viz., that Jefferies unconsciously to himself began by acting on their theories. In his final essays, however, the vacancy to be noticed in his earlier work has disappeared. He had found out that the working of a human mind—the personal element, as we say—is to those who purchase books the highest form of art. Jefferies had made hundreds of beautiful pictures of country scenes, and but a few purchased them. In his last essays you see he had added a figure, his own, to the landscape, and if one may judge by the frequency with which one sees them quoted, they are the most popular. For the reader seems always to be asking the author, What did you think about on the Downs, or when sheltered under an oak in the rainstorm? Is it with pathos or regret or sadness or hope that you recall the summer scene so vividly?

It is an egotist that answers, but in some forms of art egotism is the highest quality. Jefferies failed to describe others just because he was so intent on his own broodings and thoughts, but when he came to paint on the canvas his own strange and rich personality, his passionate love of beauty and sunshine, his fiery dreams and longings, he had imparted the finishing touch to his art. Unfortunately, like Keats and Byron, he was taken from us too soon. The crudities of youth were disappearing, and false lights were ceasing to lead him astray; after its sluggish growth his mind was ripening at last to its harvest-time, and the literary student is condemned to find in him now only suggestions of what might have been. Yet his eloquent fragments may possibly enough live long after complete works are forgotten. Easily made reputations easily die, and the fiery rushing genius of to-day, swiftly and easily as he flies up the hill of fame, discovers no rest on its summit, but is compelled to hurry still more rapidly into the thick irrevocable darkness on the thither side. If we think of the number of recent reputations that have died with the owners of them, and how many potent names of the century are shrinking and fading, it terrifies us from

lightly assuming that this or the other poet or novelist has really won a niche in the gallery of immortals. Yet the unique work of Jefferies so continues to gather to itself admirers, so absolutely proves itself inimitable that the half-educated peasant seems in a fairer way to enduring remembrance than many of those who rolled in wealth while he scrambled in poverty.