

Richard Jefferies

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First published in *Country Life*, 12 October 1901, pp.460-462 with illustrations by H.E. Tidmarsh.

IF there is any one writer who more than another should be interesting to readers of *COUNTRY LIFE*, it is Richard Jefferies. Yet now that many years have slipped away since his death, the man's own self, his struggles, ambitions, ideals, fascinates one more than any of his works. Indeed,

to be quite frank, the latter do not seem to take the place in English literature that was prophesied for them by Mr. Frederick Greenwood (to whom all honour is due for leading this genius into daylight) and other early friends and admirers of Richard Jefferies. They are spread over too many volumes. You get all Gilbert White in "Selborne," all Izaak Walton in "The Compleat Angler," and the best of Thoreau in a couple of volumes, but Jefferies was like the man who had not time to write a short letter. The others were more or less men of means and leisure. White was something between a squire and a parson, and Walton a retired merchant, while Thoreau made himself independent of money by the austere frugality of his life. Either to possess a sufficient income or by simplicity of living to be satisfied with little is best for an author. Jefferies was the greatest writer of those referred to, and yet has left behind no single work that will compare with those mentioned. He had none of Thoreau's philosophy, but instead almost a bourgeois ideal of comfort, respectability, and the rest of it. Therefore when well he spun out copy to increase his income, and when ill and suffering grievous pain he wrote like a hero to stave off hunger. It had not occurred to his mind that there was a chance of emancipating himself from the slavery common to hack writers, and so he wrote and wrote, and now you have to seek the gems of his work in a sea of commonplace, happy to pick out here a "Pageant of Summer," there "My Old Village," a passage from this work, and a chapter from that. He began life as a reporter, and never really got much beyond the ambitions of a journalist, his great dream in early life being that he would be a war



"ON THE LOOK-OUT FOR BOYS."

correspondent. The Franco-Prussian War occurred in the days of his early manhood, and left a deep mental impression behind it, which anyone may study in "Wood Magic." There are no more charming passages in the whole of his works than certain scenes in the life of Bevis, especially those relating to the brook and the wind, but the effect is spoiled through the absurd marshalling and campaigning of the birds in obvious imitation of French and Prussian tactics.

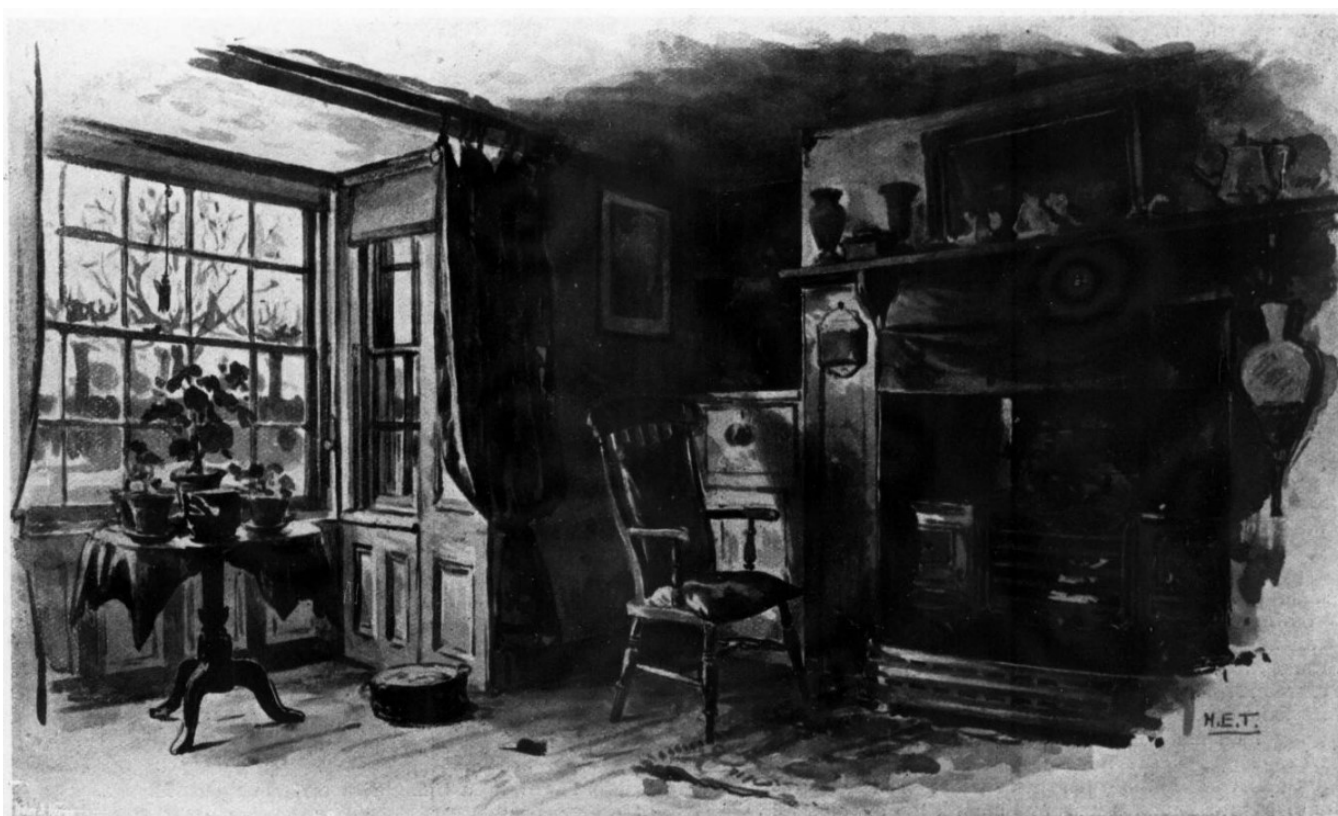
Throughout his life Jefferies did not think so much as feel. "The Story of My Heart" is no reasoned out analysis of his religious belief, but the outpouring of a passionate primitive soul naturally impelled to sun-worship. A miserable controversy arose as to whether or not he died in the Christian faith, and in a

sense his belief appears to have fluctuated. We say "in a sense," because in the still depths of his mind there was no doubt at all, only at the surface was there a difficulty in formulating his ideas even to himself. Romance for him was concentrated on "the man in the tumult," and to understand that it is necessary to bear in mind the surroundings of his childhood. Coate, where he was born, is a small hamlet about three miles from Swindon, close by the reservoirs and within a few fields breadth of the downs. His was not a particularly happy family. The father, Farmer Iden of the story, was a retiring man, continually engaged in planting trees to screen himself from the view of passers-by, learned in all kinds of field-lore, but careless—careless in dress, careless in his companionship, which was often that of labourers and loafers at

the village inn, and careless in his habits. Like many another freehold of our old yeomanry, the homestead carried traces of this trait. To-day it is snug and neat, slated and set in order; then it was roofed with thick unmended thatch, unpruned, untended trees grew on the wall, neglect and decay brooded over everything from the orchard to the summer-house. Our picture of the interior gives little idea what it used to be like when there was no grate, but an open hearth, a bundle of faggots, and simple furniture. In truth Black Care rested on the household, for the small patrimony was loaded with debt, and amid the anxieties of the household much of the sweetness and grace of life was crushed out. This to a degree was the making of Jefferies. It sent him to the open air for his pleasure. One of the surviving friends of his boyhood tells me that he



A WILTSHIRE GRANARY.



PARLOUR IN COATE FARMHOUSE.

(Probably the scene of the sleeping farmer and mice in "Amaryllis at the Fair.")

never cared for companions even in those early days, was not addicted to any of the ordinary games or pastimes, and would pass even his closest acquaintance without speaking. No doubt this was partly due to the fact of his being short-sighted, but still more to his continuous day-dreaming. As my informant put it, "He hadn't a bit of fun in him," and was scarcely ever known to laugh or crack a jest. You can imagine him a tall, long-legged, thin-chested, doubled-up slip of a boy, rather slovenly in dress and not robust in health, drinking in a silent sort of happiness from wind and sun, but enjoying it most in solitude. That abstraction, that self-concentration was to be fatal to one of his ambitions. He was so absorbed in his own ego that he could not enter into the lives of others, and vain were all his prolonged efforts to produce living pictures of the men and women who dwelt in such thatched cottages as that we picture. But the very force of his self-consciousness lent romance to the man in the barrow. Roaming, as he loved to roam, over the downs with the fine pure wind blowing in his nostrils, it was the very old, the prehistoric, that constantly met his view. On commanding spots are encampments where lay Roman warriors, and before them ancient Britons; ancient Britons had trodden the green Ridge Way, a favourite walk; and here and there a rising mound, a barrow, a tumulus, contained the bones of some chieftain illustrious in his day, but whose

very name and race are forgotten now. A very deep scholar and widely read man is very apt to lose the edge of his wonder. He becomes immersed in questions of history, philology, archaeology, and scatters his energy over many fields. **Jellicoe**, though fairly well-read, was not a great scholar. His school life consisted largely of playing truant, and if he afterwards mastered a good English style, it was owing in great measure to his luck in falling into the hands of Mr. Frederick Greenwood, who inherited a tradition of naturalness from his friend Thackeray. One thought, therefore, transcended all others in the boy's mind, and it was elaborated again and again. Nature, so still and quiet, unrecking of this or that ego, turned the same face beautiful and indifferent to countless generations. The man in the barrow, some yellow-haired chieftain of dim and distant date, roved over these downs and drank of the brook, and felt the same pleasures as he who now stood there. From the high downs you can see many fair manors, with parks and orchards and gardens, and on them lord and tenant and labourer had walked to and fro or tilled the soil with enduring care. They had passed across the stage from the unknown into the unknown, and made no difference. The mind that saw all this had to front the same fate, and in passionate rebellion he asks how the birds can sing and the flowers blow in their due procession without him to keep the calendar for them. It was a treasure-house of beautiful impressions, and must it too dissolve into the viewless wind? To many a homely picture does that feeling of wonder and grief, always "at the back of his head," lend pathos. He lived in a district where much of the past remains to keep all



COTTAGES AT CHISLETON.

this alive. In Chisledon Churchyard, where the piled-up graves reach nearly to the windows—windows that look out on downs grey with sheep—it could not be absent, and in the farm near by, whence our artist has got his quaint picture of a thatched and movable granary, there is much to bring up the reflection in homelier form. Some years ago the owner of it showed me an old note-book diary kept by an eighteenth century tenant, and found at the foundation of the old wall, into which it had apparently dropped by accident. It revealed a little world of people that, save for this accident, would have passed as completely into oblivion as the man in the barrow.

But if it be closely looked into, it will be found that this is what distinguishes **Jefferies** from the writers so often and so

negligently classed with him. The note, indeed, is modern, and but little heard in the eighteenth century, when Gilbert White lived, yet not altogether absent even then, since Gray, before his contemporaries in so many things, anticipated them in this also. **Jefferies** eternal “Why?” never seems to have troubled the quiet little parson of Selborne, who was content to marshal facts and describe them. It did not trouble lovable Izaak, who goes a-fishing in the sea or walking in the chequered meadows, who cooks his fish or sings the ballads pinned to the inn-walls without allowing a thought of melancholy to intrude. Nor did it greatly trouble Mr. Ruskin, who was more than a little sure of many things, and, like Martha, was occupied with much serving, or, in other words, politics of no very good cast. There is nothing contradictory, but all is harmony in this world if only

the explanation goes deep enough, and whoever studies the character of Jefferies rightly will not be surprised that he never cared to return to his old village. In that he was extremely like the late Lord Tennyson, who, during the final part of his career, only paid one or two furtive visits to Somersby. Jefferies did not return to Coate at all. Probably he did not like to see in the hands of strangers a patrimony that had belonged to his family since the days of Queen Elizabeth. And, if he had gone, it would only to have been shocked. The last time I was there, at anyrate, the place had been fitted up as a very business-like milk farm, and anything further removed from sentiment than its array of milk-cans and other gear was inconceivable. Perhaps the musk may grow up among the cobble-stones yet, but the rest has been mended and planted and trimmed till it bears nothing to distinguish it from a hundred other farms. Improvements and new buildings have changed the whole character of the countryside. Here and there a veteran is to be met who knew Richard Jefferies in the life, or, at least, knew the outward appearance of him, his stature, apparent weight, and dress, who had watched him on the downs and heard the sound of his voice. But the general idea was summed up by one who remarked that he was "Nowt of a farmer," and as to his dreams and thoughts and ideas they never shared them, and nowhere are you more inclined to quote the text which says that a prophet is not without honour save in his own country. The human interest, as has before been said, was never very strong in Jefferies, and probably he had no great wish to go back merely to be stared at. And it was not in the slightest degree necessary for him to go there to refresh his memory of the scenery. At the very end of his life, when pain, disease, and poverty had about done their worst, he lay on his deathbed and dictated one of the most vivid and beautiful accounts of Coate. Hill, vale, and mere had passed into his very soul, and he had but to think, and imagination at once began to shape once more the pictures his eye had caught when in careless boyhood he first strolled the downs, and wondered with a boy's wonder if the same elastic turf had been trod by the man in the barrow.

P. A. G.