A LINK WITH JEFFERIES

By ARTHUR C. CLARKE

Unpublished letters written when he was engaged on "Red Deer"

THIS year marks the centenary of the birth of Richard Jefferies, whose writings will be treasured by those who cherish the beauty of natural things and are sensitive to the music of words.

In 1882 Jefferies visited Exmoor to collect material for his book *Red Deer*, which was published by Longmans two years later. At that time the Huntsman of the Devon and Somerset Staghounds was Arthur Heal, and from the Heal family Jefferies obtained much of his information about the red deer, both when he was on Exmoor and later by correspondence. These facts were unknown to the writer (Arthur Heal's great-grandson) until New Year's Day, 1948, when a worn copy of *Red Deer* came into his hands and was found, to his great surprise and pleasure, to be sheltering a number of letters from Jefferies. They are addressed to Fred Heal, who was the Huntsman's second son.

The book bears the inscription : "Fred G. Heal, Esq. From the Author, Jan. 10th, 1884," and it is amusing to read in the introduction to the Constable edition of *The Story of My Heart* that when Jefferies had requested some more copies of this book Longman replied testily that he had already had sixteen and could not his friends buy them? This must have been one of the volumes whose generous distribution had aroused the publisher's protests.

These letters probably form part of a more extensive series, and though they are largely concerned with stag-hunting they throw a considerable light on Jefferies' personality and show that his long fight against ill-health had destroyed neither his kindliness nor his range of interests.

Two of the letters do not bear the full date but are merely headed "Aug. 5th" and "Sept. 9th." However, they were probably written in 1883 or 1884, and both are addressed from "Savernake," Lorna Road, West Brighton.

Aug. 5th.

Dear Mr. Heal,

I did not forget the book I offered you, but I have been so pressed with business that everything else has had to be put aside. I looked at a Fly-book for you but it seemed to me that you knew all the flies in it so that it would be like sending coals to Newcastle. So I have sent you a complete edition of Tennyson's Poems; the Northern Farmer may amuse you, whose horses' hoofs said "Property, Property." I still hope to see something if the stag-hunting (*two words illegible*) this month: should I come I will write to you. Remember me to Arthur and give the hound Sovereign an extra biscuit for me; he is a yellow hound.

Faithfully yours,

Richard Jefferies.

"Arthur" is, of course, Arthur Heal, who is frequently referred to indirectly in *Red Deer*.

On September 9th Jefferies raises a technical query which suggests that at the date of writing he was working on his book.

Sept. 9th.

Dear Mr. Heal,

I have just read in *The Field* that you have had two runs in the Quantocks, the hunt being through the places I was visiting before I came on to Exford. Will you answer the following enquiry? —we have had some disputes and arguments as to the number of points a stag should bear to be runnable, and on reference to old books (one of them 300 years old), I find that a difference of opinion has always prevailed, some saying that a stag at five years bears so many points, and some another number. There seems to be great difference of opinion among the authorities, and also among sportsmen. The question is this, How many points must the antlers of a young stag bear before he becomes runnable? Or to put it in other words, How many points does a stag usually bear at five years? I am sure you will understand what I mean and if you can find time to reply I shall feel obliged.

My stag's skin is stretched out on the floor of the room here in which I am writing—Everyone admires it.

I remain, Faithfully yours,

Richard Jefferies.

It would be interesting to know Mr. Heal's reply to this query, for the answer is not a straightforward one.

A third letter, dated January 10th, 1884, also comes from West Brighton.

Jan. 10th, 1884.

Dear Mr. Heal,

I have written a little book about the Red Deer —it is just published and I send you a copy by this post. When you have read it write and tell me how you like it. The idea of the book is to introduce the red deer and the fine old sport of stag-hunting to the great numbers of people who have scarcely heard of it, and who will scarcely believe it when they do.

My health was so bad in September that I was quite unable to come down; indeed I am still very unwell indeed.

JEFFERIES' LAST DAYS AT GORING

Please remember me to "Arthur" (which is more his name than any other) and to your kind Mother.

I remain, Faithfully yours,

Richard Jefferies.

What is certainly the last of the four letters is dated September 16th, 1884. It is addressed "14, Victoria Road, Eltham, Kent," and the writing is noticeably poorer. Perhaps it is the last letter Mr. Heal ever received from Jefferies.

Sept. 16th, 1884.

Dear Mr. Heal,

I should like to hear how the stag-hunting gets on this season, I see notices in the papers occasionally but rather bald and should like to hear from you. I have left Brighton, it was considered that to live inland would be better for me and so I came here. Though close to London it is quite country, fields, trees and so on. I still remain so weak that it is impossible for me to enjoy any sport but my interest is as keen as ever, and if I should ultimately recover I shall certainly revisit Somerset. I hope you are all well at home.

I remain, Faithfully yours,

Richard Jefferies.

The hopes expressed in this last letter were never to be fulfilled: Jefferies' health had now broken completely and after a long and painful illness he died in 1887. He was less than 39 years of age.

In his time there were places where the continuity with the past was still unbroken. He could write "modern civilisation has passed like a breath of wind, stirring the leaves of the trees but leaving them as they were." More than a generation ago the wind rose to a gale and stripped the leaves away.

A Countryman's Journal

By H. J. MASSINGHAM

ONE of the most fatal catchwords that has been misleading our age into ruin is "you can't put the clock back." Supposing the clock stops (as it shows every sign of doing), you can't wind it up again to go if you can't put it back. In other words, this catchpenny phrase is obviously a popular form of fatalism and nothing else. It is a confession of nothing more worthy than sheer helplessness, a drifting along that automatic way of historical process like a twig down the rapids. Yet this shibboleth expressing the inept paralysis of the will is used again and again, even by men of intelligence and goodwill, as though it were the final and decisive reply to every effort to extricate ourselves from an untenable position. A clear recognition of our power to discriminate between what is good and what is bad are all disowned by it. It represents a surrender of what distinguishes man from beast, the faculty of rational choice.

A simple change of metaphor exposes the fallacy of this stupid phrase at a glance. If you can't put the clock back, you can't go back and find the right road if you are on the wrong one. You must just go further and further along it and leave the right road so much the further away. I am led to this reflection by hearing on the Third Programme a talk on soil erosion and its remedy by an officer of the U.S. Soil Conservation Bureau, an event sufficiently remarkable when you consider that the most pressing of all the issues that confront mankind has hitherto received no attention at all from the wireless.

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THE speaker proceeded to paint a picture of what man is doing to extinguish his own species by starvation only to be compared with Michelangelo's Last Judgment. He pointed out that, though mankind has increased by 645,000,000 in the last 50 years, half the world's population is undernourished, only eight per cent. of the earth's cultivable virgin soil remains and the race with world famine is being lost. In spite of all the efforts of the U.S.S.C.B., North America is still losing half a million acres per annum to erosion and I know myself that South Africa is losing 300,000 acres per annum. The speaker went on to say that one-third of all China is now barren from gully erosion and that a million acres of North Syria that once supplied the Roman Empire with wine and oils has been put out of action.

To-day, the lands round the Mediterranean that once supported a multitude of cities, are now mostly desert, like the Sahara, once the corn-granary of Rome. In Australia, the Euphrates, Central and Eastern Europe, there and elsewhere the same tale drearily repeats itself. Only a few limited areas, the speaker went on, are free from erosion. Politics are mere smoke beside this modern pillage of the earth, for "when the soil is gone, all is gone." We are only saved from the same fate ourselves by the accident of climate. If we continue felling woodlands at the present rate the mercy of rainfall will desert us too.

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SO the tale of calamity—and then the remedy. To my astonishment, the speaker almost confined himself to grandiose visions of hydro-electric plant, huge dam-buildings and the like, presumably on the model of the Tennessee Valley Authority. All very serviceable, of course, but what on earth is the use of irrigation and electric schemes without good land to cultivate and good husbandmen upon it? The whole point of harnessing the Tennessee River was that the small farmers of the Valley were secured from financial and industrial exploitation and so relieved from the need of *land*-exploitation. But because "you can't put the clock back," modern civilization imagines that the spectre of famine can be exorcised by the engineer. Gigantic delusion!

The engineer is useless except as an accessory. Can *he* solve the problem of how to educate an incorrigible urban mentality in the laws of husbandry and fertility, or reverse the drift from the land, or recreate the biologically responsible farmer, or rebuild an economic system that will favour such a farmer instead of forcing him to be a land-miner, or renew the love and conservation of the land as a sacred trust from Providence? But unless this tremendous change in the mental climate of our age can struggle into life out of the birth-pangs of necessity, I do not myself see how *Homo sapiens* can continue much longer as an inhabitant of our planet. Unless man can turn back from the wrong road to find the right one, the die is cast against our species.