

INTRODUCTION to *Amaryllis at the Fair/After London* by David Garnett
1936 (Everyman Library – London: J M Dent & Sons, 1939)

Amaryllis at the Fair and *After London* can be appreciated better when we understand their close relationship to their author's origins and experience of life. Richard Jefferies came of a long line of substantial Wiltshire yeomen on his father's side, and from a family of skilled craftsmen, engravers and printers, on his mother's. But, from a variety of economic and spiritual causes, in the nineteenth century the yeomanry of England were a vanishing class. Their standards of living, and their culture, sank rapidly until a large part of them were but little above the farm labourers with whom many of them were to merge.

James Luckett Jefferies, Richard's father, born in 1816, was a remarkable and original man, with a wide knowledge of the best of everything connected with country life. He had gone out to America as a young man, but returned to marry and settle down on the small dairy farm of only forty acres which belonged to his father at Coate, near Swindon. The farm did not, probably could not, pay, and James Luckett was soon in debt. Richard Jefferies, born in 1848, grew up to be a tall, slight lad, who rambled about with a gun under his arm and a book in his pocket. He was a great reader, a dreamer, a close observer of nature; but his loafing appeared to be leading nowhere and his father pointed with anger to 'our Dick poking about in them hedges.'

Yet these were the most important years of his life. Jefferies has idealized and immortalized his boyhood in *Bevis* and the loafing years of adolescence were to furnish the material for *The Amateur Poacher*, *The Gamekeeper at Home*, etc. But he could not dream for ever, and his way of escape was by becoming a reporter for the *North Wilts Herald*. Jefferies's development as a writer was slow: he wrote superficially of the Wiltshire labourer and of local archaeology, and turned out impossible novels about aristocratic heroines, of which *The Scarlet Shawl* and *Restless Human Hearts* were the first published.

It was not till Jefferies was dying of tuberculosis in 1886 that he took the characters of his parents, and particularly of his father, as the subject of his last book, *Amaryllis at the Fair*. His father, James Luckett Jefferies, is Iden: in my opinion the greatest portrait of a countryman in English literature. No writer has drawn his father with greater love and more complete understanding. We know not only what the man was, but what were his wasted potentialities. Iden is a great tragic portrait, for Richard Jefferies makes him expound a philosophy which is not the less terrible because it was partly unconscious. It is the philosophy of failure, and both *Amaryllis at the Fair* and *After London* are expressions of that form of pessimism which is loosely referred to to-day as defeatism. Iden is a village Hampden, a mute inglorious Milton, a man who could have excelled in anything, but who moulders away his life pottering round a few unproductive, heavily mortgaged fields, because his temper is too fine. He will not compromise his standards, will no longer compete in the struggle for existence. He is, in short, of the temper of those savages who prefer dying out to adapting themselves to the machine-made age. *Amaryllis at the Fair* is full of the

consumptive's love and heightened sense of the material world. There are pages which are poems about mutton, gravy, floury potatoes, and swede greens; poems in praise of seasoned oak gates, damask roses, and Goliath Old Ale. It is, I think, the combination of this passion for life and the despairing renunciation of making a success of it which gives *Amaryllis at the Fair* its unique emotional quality.

The book is a complete picture of Jefferies's origins. His mother's side of the family is represented in the Fleet Street draughtsman and engraver, Alere Flamma, who is a portrait of Richard Jefferies's uncle, Fred Gyde. Incidentally *Alere Flamma* is the motto of an old-established firm of printers which, with the device of a Roman lamp, may be found on the colophons of some books. It has always seemed probable that the Gydes, who had intermarried with the printing family Harrild, may have been connected with this firm.

Yet though *Amaryllis at the Fair* contains the great figure of Iden and is full of a unique emotion, it is a complete failure as a novel. Richard Jefferies was not a novelist and could not be one because he was not interested in movement. His characters are exactly described, often with genius, but they are at rest. *Amaryllis at the Fair* is a succession of 'stills,' never a picture in motion. Indeed movement or development of any kind seems ruled out from the structure of the book. The reader who expects a novel will be disappointed. So will he who has none of the consumptive's love for reality: who does not value swede tops and gravy, the grain of wood, and the March wind drying the oil out of the girl's hair, for their own sakes. On the other hand, if you understand and respect Iden, particularly if you share to some extent his philosophy of defeatism, *Amaryllis at the Fair* is one of the very great books of the world.

Amaryllis herself seems to me an extraordinarily successful picture of a country girl. This is largely because Jefferies does so little with her. He seems to have learned that he was incapable as a novelist, and, apart from one half-hearted effort, leaves Amaryllis almost entirely to her feelings without trying to invent incident.

After a severe illness in 1881 and 1882, Jefferies went to recuperate at Brighton, and the two years he spent there were the most productive of his life. It was there that he wrote *After London*, in which he took revenge, in imagination, on the city and the civilization which were associated in his mind with his illness, even though they are not likely to have been the cause of it. Romances of the future form a strange class of book, since they get out of date in peculiar ways. For example, when one re-reads many of Wells's scientific romances, such as *The War of the Worlds* or *The War in the Air*, one is aware, all the time, that whatever the future may hold, it will not be that bizarre mixture of Edwardian England and half-visualized, astonishing machinery. *After London* is an exception: though it was written early in 1884, to-day it appears a far more probable forecast of the future than it can ever have done to its author. To him, indeed, most likely it seemed almost inconceivable that such a state of affairs as he describes should ever come to pass. He saw the country he loved being eaten up by the growth of the city which had drawn him into its crowds and robbed him of his health. Hating London, at that time, he dreamed of its destruction. Yet such was the

security of the Victorian world of 1884 that he was quite unable to imagine an agency which should bring it about. To-day it is hard to believe that London, or any other great European city, will escape at least partial destruction. *After London* has assumed a new meaning.

Both *Amaryllis at the Fair* and *After London* were favourite books of my friend Julian Bell, who was killed by an aeroplane bomb dropped on the ambulance which he was driving for the Spanish Government during the civil war. Though he was never tempted to adopt the defeatist philosophy, Julian Bell's imagination was profoundly influenced by Richard Jefferies, and *After London* inspired two fine poems, written while he was an undergraduate at King's College, Cambridge. One of these is so exactly to the point, giving the modern gloss to the part which Jefferies purposely left vague, since his imagination had failed him, that I quote it here from the memorial volume of his letters, poems, and essays, called *Julian Bell*, published by The Hogarth Press, to which I would refer readers anxious to read his other poems inspired by Jefferies. The following poem is, in fact, the best preface to *After London* that can be imagined:

MARSH BIRDS PASS OVER LONDON
Irregular Ode

The traffic roars along the street
All through the lamp-lit town,
And endless crowds on shuffling feet
Go walking up and down.
Cars down an empty road
Sweep like a chariot race,
Rush in windy circles round
A broad, sky-open place.
Couples will dance, and bands will play,
And endless people hurry by.
Till it is almost time for day
To light the London sky.
Almost the time when sleepy cows
Are called from a clanging gate,
And Barn Owls hoot from the elm boughs,
And autumn dawn comes late.
But in the city the hot light
Dances like flick'ring flame,
Red and green and blue and white,
In shifting patterns still the same.

The light of the city
Has reddened the sky.
And there are but few stars
To shine on passers-by.
On beating wings the Redshanks go
So far and high
That none can see them, few can catch and know
Their wailing cry.
Curlew and Whimbrel
Take that way,

Plovers Golden
And Plovers Grey,
Lapwing. and Dotterel
From far away.
Steadily southward
Goes their flight,
They will rest on sea-beaches
To-morrow night,
They have left their marshes
And the hoar-frost white.
Southward and southward
And south to the sea,
Over the city and far away
Those high, shrill voices sound warningly.

The passing Whimbrel that none hear
Have shrieked a prophecy of fear.
The Seven Whistlers, as they fly,
Tell of who follows presently.
Loud warning all that they beware
Of armies hastening in the air,
That sweep in with a droning flight,
Continually, by day and night.
All through the night great houses flare,
The tattered walls that the bombs tear
Seem broken tins and jars left bare
In muddy sewers, when, the sea
Ebbs from the tide-swept estuary.

Fallen, fallen and fallen,
The city fallen and gone.
The marsh birds' desolate calling
Comes menacing from the sky,
The city is falling, falling,
The passing Whimbrel cry.
And the down shepherds with their sheep
See the advancing grasses creep,
Walls crumble stone from stone,
Bone fall from bone.
The city now gleams white and fair
For no smoke clouds the air
Or blackens any wall
At all.
So white, so quiet, it seems to be
A seaside hamlet's cemet'ry
Covered in ground mist chill
On some September morning calm and still.
Grey clouds from the north-east,
Where the river mouth is wide;
The waters piled in a tattered hill
Sweep in on the spring tide.
The waters tower above the shore,
Grow higher and higher yet.
Steep curling waves that leap before

The heaved swell of the tidal bore
That hurries up the town.
Each ruined bridge comes tumbling down,
The waves pour through each gap
That bombs have torn in great stone dykes,
Steadily rise and lap
Against what doors and window-panes
Men had the time to close.
Cascades down every flight of steps,
And still the flooding grows:
Each street a river from side to side,
Where littered wavelets leap;
Steadily the floods gain ground,
What they have won they keep.
The tides sweep in and out again,
Fret and grind at the walls
Already shattered: splashing
In the spreading marsh each falls.
A muddy island, small and low,
Where purple, tall sea-asters grow
On the columns of Saint Paul's.
The ruins make an endless maze
Of banks and channels, gulfs and bays,
With flaking stone hid in the mud.

An empty marsh beneath sides grey.
Where only birds come all the day;
But through the dark the marsh fires gleam
From rotting weeds, and shifting, seem
The blurred reflection of the lights
That danced there for a thousand nights.
And with their desolate calling
Comes the Whimbrel's flight.
Fallen, fallen and fallen
The cities pass and fall,
The wild birds of the marshes
See the end of them all.

That is the prelude to *After London*. It was written more than ten years ago, before there was any hint of Germany rearming and rewinging herself. The day of which Jefferies dreamed, and which Julian Bell heard in the marsh birds flying over in the small hours of the morning, now draws very near. For this reason every one reading *After London* to-day will draw their own versions of the relapse into barbarism prophesied in it. One at least has been published, for John Collier's *Tom's a-Cold* owes much to Jefferies and is all the more interesting because of the closeness to its model.

The second half of *After London* is less satisfactory, and I can only defend liking it as much as I do because it is a version of *Bevis*, in which I can recognize the characters, much as one may enjoy an inferior play because one can see the features of one's favourite actors under an unfamiliar make-up. Felix Aquila is Bevis, Sir Oliver is Mark, and the great

lake stretching from the Severn across the Thames valley to the mouth of the Thames is nothing more nor less than the reservoir at Coate.

The philosophy of Iden is there, too: indeed, Iden himself is there in the shadowy version of Sir Constans. But, for whatever reason, I still read the second half of *After London* with the same pleasure that I did as a boy. On the other hand, my feeling for the first half has completely changed. I used to long for the 'relapse into barbarism' much as a Redskin on his reservation might be supposed to long for the skyscrapers to fall and the beavers to start building their dams on the edges of Manhattan Island. Now I feel that before Jefferies's prophecy comes to pass five million cockneys will know the reason why—and that they will hold out as bravely as the people of Madrid.