

JEFFERIES THE NATURALIST.

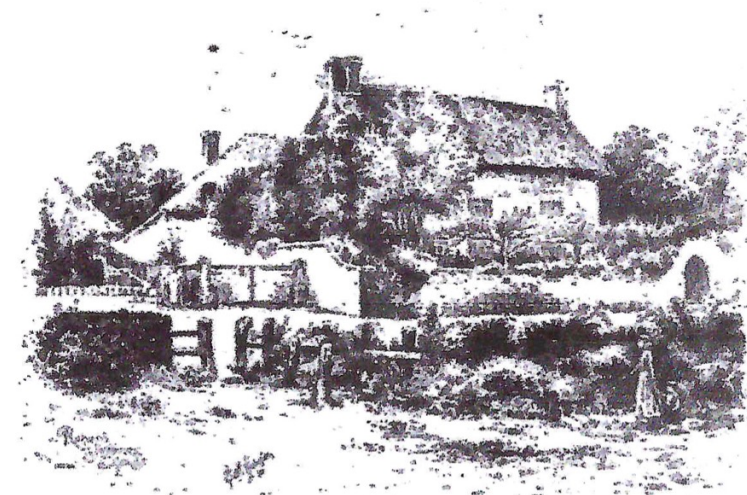
By THE REV. R. G. JOHNS, M.A.

SINCE the days of honest old Izaak Walton, best known as an angler, and yet a born lover of nature, who sang of green fields and woodland streams, a host of eager and loving students have devoted themselves to the study of the book of nature, for their own joy and the delight of thousands of readers. Kirby and Spence, whose kindly lives were given to minute observation of the insect world; Huber, who, though blind, saw more and tells us more of the works and ways of ants and bees than any one other observer; and Gilbert White, of Selborne, who in a single volume has comprised an incomparable history of the district where he lived and toiled and died; are, with many

his communings with the wild life he loved so well; his inmost thoughts, feelings, hopes, longings, and, at times, of his despair. For, even of that bitter root he often tasted, though he had a noble endurance, which, at last, by God's help, carried him bravely through long years of trouble and sharpest pain.

Unlike some of those other famous men whom I have named, though full of knowledge, the result of unwearied observation, it is not so much by the abundant store of bare facts that he arrests and delights us, as by their flush and glow of colour. He sees everything through the eyes of a poet, and gives himself up, heart, mind, and soul, to the painting so instinct with life, so full of gracious harmony, that we, too, if there be a spark of poetry in us, may see and feel what he sees, and as he saw it.

The story of his life is short and sad, and may be told—for the present purpose—in not many words. Coate, where Jefferies was born in 1848, is a lonely village, not far from Swindon, and the vale of the White Horse, immortalised in "Tom Brown," on the edge of a wild moorland stretching away up towards the high, chalky downs, where he loved to wander, and of which he



others, well known to the world. But those only have made themselves a lasting name whose hearts were in the work; for whom the open air and the sunshine, the rain-cloud and the snow, or the shadow on the hill; the silence or the song of the woods and fields; the grass and the flowers, the bird and the bee; with every creature that haunts the whole domain, had one and all alike some secret and living word of interest.

Such a man was Richard Jefferies. There is no need to say which or what Jefferies; for all have read his works, and everybody knows him. His books are full of himself—of his sayings and doings in the fresh air, of

so often wrote. The old farmhouse, where he grew up as a boy, and where his forefathers for more than one generation had lived before him, still stands, as roughly picturesque as ever. The country is one that changes little, and the rougher, wilder part is probably much the same as it was in the days when Tressilian crossed it on his way from Amy Robsart's prison, along the vale of the White Horse. His horse had cast a shoe, and he, after many wanderings, had fairly lost his way, when his imp of a guide cried out, "Here we are, at Wayland Smith's forge-door." They were in the midst of a bare moor, a ring of stones, with a great one in the midst, like a Cor-

nish barrow. The great flat stone on the top of the uprights, pointed out as the Smith's counter, has long ago tumbled from its place, but "the Cave," as the villagers still call it, is yet to be seen, though the magic of the famous forge has long since died away. Far off on the hillside still shines the White Horse, hard by which, in 871, Alfred gained his famous victory over the Danes; while below it, all round Coate itself, lie rich and fertile meadows, where herds of sleek cattle graze, where the song of the lark is always to be heard, and every stunted hedgerow is alive with birds, to whose every note Jefferies once listened with unfailing delight. Here he wandered at will, not only through the summer days, but at all seasons and in all weathers. It is on a winter morning there that he himself says,—

"Step aside from the trodden footpath of personal experience, throwing away the petty cynicism born of petty disappointed hopes, step out on the broad down beside the young, green corn, and let its freshness become part of your life. The wind passes, and it bends—let the wind, too, pass over the spirit. From the cloud-shadow it emerges into the sunshine; let the heart come out from the shadow of roofs to the open glow of the sky. High above, the lark's song falls as rain—receive it with open hands. Broad are the downs, and open is the aspect—gather the breadth and largeness of view. Never can that view be wide or large enough. As the air of the hill enriches the blood, so the presence of these beautiful things enriches the inner sense. One memory of the green corn, fresh beneath sun and wind, will lift up the heart from the clouds to heaven."

Away beyond the meadows, as he wrote these glowing words, stretched the rampart of the hills; and there he thus held happy converse with the passing breeze, the

springing corn and flowers, the trees, the grass, and the sedge. There, no doubt, he carried with him his well-worn copy of *Pilgrim's Progress*, or *Shakespeare*; for he was an insatiable devourer of every book that fell in his way, and knew them all as intimately as he afterwards learned to know every page in that wider book of nature which God opened to him. In no other way can we account for the photographic minuteness and abundance of detail with which every picture of his is crowded. He dealt with the whole economy of rural life, far and wide. The fields, the woods, the chalky downs, the very air, the clouds, the rain or the snow were to him full of voices, voices which he knew and loved, and answered, and treasured up in his heart. A single paragraph out of one of his least-known papers will show this beyond dispute. No hand could have written it, but of one whose boyhood and riper age had been devoted to happy communing with nature. The only fault, if fault is to be found, is over-crowding. The details are, at times, too many and too minute. There is no one special feature of chief importance round which the minor points are grouped. And, yet, the picture as a whole is full of life, reality, and interest; painted with the skill of an artist in perfect words. Let the



The Keeper's House, near Coate.



The Hatches behind Coate.

reader judge for himself, by a single passage on "The Roof."

"Robins often visit the roof for insects, especially when it is thatched; so do wrens, which, after peering along the eaves, have a habit of perching at the extreme end of a gable, or edge of a corner, and there uttering their song. Finches fly up to the roofs of country houses, if shrubberies are near, also in pursuit of insects, though not roof

birds. Wagtails perch on roofs, often having their nests in ivy, or creepers trained against the walls, and being quite at home on the ridges of the farmhouse. Tits of many kinds, especially the great titmouse and the blue tit, come to the thatch to hunt alike in summer and winter. In some districts a goatsucker, or fern owl, hawks along the eaves in the twilight for moths. Jackdaws build in the roofs of towers; bats live in the roof, and hang there wrapped up in their membranous wings till the

evening. Every crevice is the abode of insects, or is used by them for the deposit of eggs, under the tiles or slates, where mortar has dropped out between the bricks, in the holes of the thatch, and on the straws."

It is in this exhaustive fashion that he treats every topic; even down to the flags and sedges, in the water-meadow, or the hatches below the mill; now and then wandering away into thoughts of dreamy musing; half talking to himself, and half to the creatures about him—or the stones, the moss, or the silent trees. Lonely and desolate enough, at times, must his wanderings have been; but he, too, no doubt, as many

another such student, had never better or more abundant company than when alone. If he found little encouragement at home, even from his own people or his acquaintances, he made a friend of the shepherd, or the woodman, or the bird boy, or better still, "The Gamekeeper," whose picturesque cottage is still to be found not far from Coate; and was doubtless in his mind's eye, when, years after, he wrote the famous book which bears that name. No wonder that such a youth as this was not understood by the poor rustic folk of the lonely hamlet; musing, dreaming, as he always was, and already longing to write down the crowd of busy



Wayland Smith's Cave, near Coate.

thoughts that haunted him. His firm belief was that he was born to achieve fame by pen and ink; though his father would not hear of it, but insisted on his becoming a farmer. To this Jefferies strongly objected; write he must and would: and at last he had his way. After endless difficulties he managed to get some work on a few local newspapers; he wrote some very striking letters on farming and agriculture. He even got into *The Times*, and there attracted special notice. But, the strength of his mind was at that time given to the writing of several high-flown sentimental novels; poor and weak of their kind—as works of romance or of art—published chiefly at his own expense, and all destined to perish, though full

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of vivid and true pictures drawn direct from nature; echoes of the woods and fields and people of his native place. He had yet to find his true vocation, and find it he did. Nobody else, he says, sadly enough:

"saw what he saw, the sparkle of the winding stream, or the music at the hatch; no one knew how good it was, or why it was good at all, to drink in the fresh air."

Yet, what a joy it was to him!

"Oak follows oak, and elm ranks with elm, but the woodlands are ever new; however many times repeated their beauty only increases. No, too, the summer days; the sun rises on the same grasses and green hedge, there is the same blue sky, the same boundless air: but did ever one have enough of them? No, not in a hundred years. There seems always a depth somewhere beyond, unexplored; a

thicket that has not been explored, a thicket not seen through, a corner full of ferns, a quaint, old, hollow tree, that has yet something to give us."

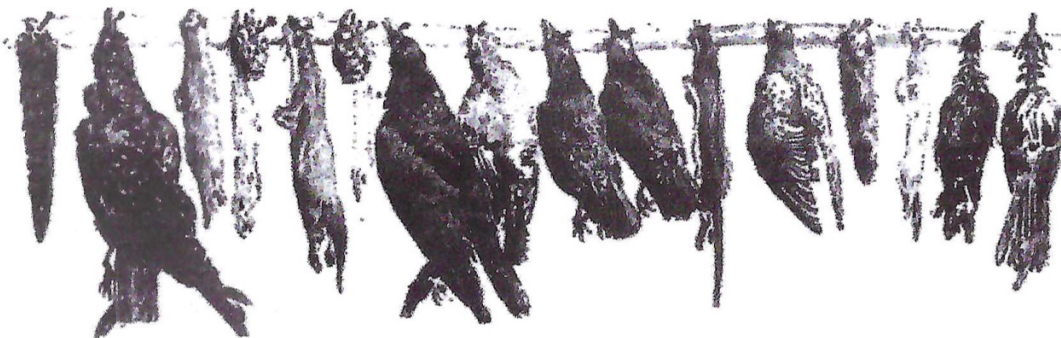
This is from his wonderful paper, "The Pageant of Summer," written years after when at the height of his fame, but written when his body was racked with the constant and intolerable pain of an incurable internal disease, which at last killed him in his prime. Every page of that remarkable essay—twenty-five in all—is full of the flush and glory of summer-tide, and the lustrous beauty that shone fresh from the hand of God. One would imagine that the writer's whole life must then have been all sunshine and brightness, free from all cloud of pain or care. And yet, as he wrote, he was barely known, in broken health, with few friends, and at his wit's end to find means of support for his wife and children; rarely complaining, always at work, always hoping—though all but desperate. See what a picture he makes out of the life of an insect:—

"It is the patient humble-bee that goes down into the forest of the mowing-grass. If entangled he climbs up a sorrel stem, and takes wing without a sign of annoyance. His broad back with tawny golden bar glides buoyantly over the buttercups. He hums to himself as he goes, so happy is he. He knows no skep, no cunning work in glass receives his labour, no artificial saccharine aids him when the sun grows cold, there is no step to his house that he may alight in comfort; no shelter if the storm suddenly descends; he has no dome of twisted straw well

thatched to retreat to. His nest is away under the rough grasses and moss of the mound, a mere tunnel beneath the fibres and matted surface. The hawthorn overhangs it, the fern half hides it, and mice rustle past it."

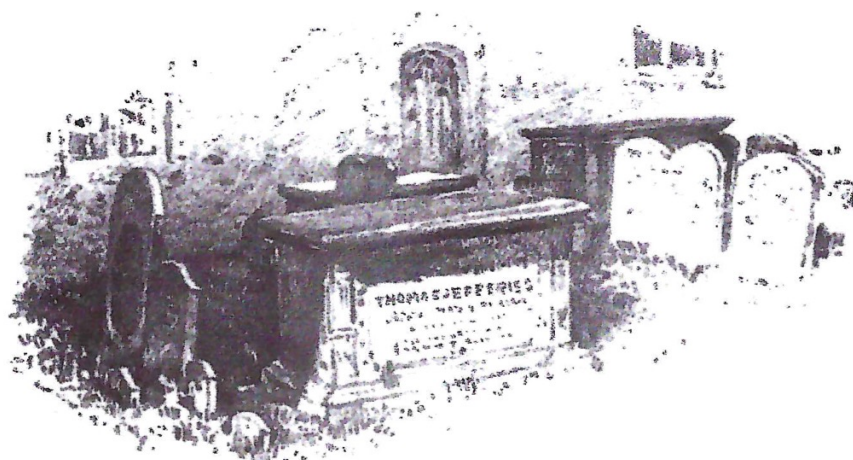
The wonder is where he learnt to write in this strong, racy style, and to gather such a store of simple, but exact words. Shakespeare, and a few other of the masters of language, doubtless did much for him; but we cannot help thinking that it was to the grand storehouse of all, the Bible—which he knew well as a boy—that he was indebted for his splendid command of Saxon English. Well would it have been for him if his childish faith in the Book of Books had never failed. In the midst of his endless difficulties, the dark days of shattered hopes, wearing anxiety, and unfulfilled dreams, it might have been to him a "strength and stay" beyond all price.

But it was not to be. Search where we may through the whole range of his impassioned writings, it is nature that comes first, man second, and any trace of a higher power as the source of all is rarely hinted at, and even then only in the third place. And, yet, deep down in that glowing, troubled heart of his there must have been a secret spring of faith in the unseen, of which he was hardly conscious. The name of God is scarcely to be found throughout his whole writings; but more than once in his lonely



wanderings we find him, in the very agony of his spirit, giving way to some wild and overpowering longing to be other and better than he was, which at last breaks out into the actual words of prayer, "Give me," he cries, "all the thought, the idea, the soul, expressed in the whole world about me; give me the unknown soul, wholly apart from it." If a man pray, even in this vague fashion,

there must be someone to whom he prays other and greater than himself. It is a longing for more light;—to him the distant sky, the boundless air, the far space are alike full of "soul-secrets and soul-life"; so that he at last exclaims, as Jefferies did, "my own existence is so marvellous, so miracle-like, that I must be on the margin of life illimitable." In very deed, he was far nearer the margin



Some of the Jefferies Tombstones.

of that life immortal than as yet he at all knew. The God whom he was feeling after, and dimly discerning, was leading him by a way that he knew not of;—the sharp path of suffering. The last few years of his life were of unbroken, bitter suffering; through all which the loving and faithful wife, whom he had married at Chiselden Church, on the Wiltshire downs, nursed and tended him with devoted care. Up to this time the old happy beliefs of his childhood seemed to have died out of him; but now, doubtless, the loving words of his nurse, by God's blessing, recalled the truths he had so long forgotten. The good seed once sown, after a wintry sleep, again sprang up, and bore happy fruit. He had fallen ill in 1881 of a terrible internal disease, which had demanded the surgeon's knife four times in a single year. The incessant pain brought on utter prostration; food caused fresh agony; he was dying by inches. He could neither lie nor sit without sharp suffering; he could scarcely crawl out into the air; but though his body seemed dead, his mind was keenly alive, and almost to the last he persisted in work, though too weak to use pen and ink. Once, by the seaside, he had said: "I prayed aloud in the roar of the waves, my soul strong as the sea, I prayed with the sea's might; give me, I cried, a greatness and perfection of soul higher than all things."

And, at last, his earnest prayer and longing seemed to be granted. His patient endurance in spite of all suffering, never failed him; and, like the Prodigal of old, he "came to himself." The fuller soul for which he had

so long thirsted was given to him. The old faith came back. "Our time," says his faithful wife, "had been for long spent in prayer together while reading the Gospel of St. Luke." His last words were, "Yes, that is so. Help, Lord, for Jesu's sake. Darling, good-bye. God bless you and my children, and save you all from such great pain." In what happier, better words could the end have come?

He was buried, far away from his own people, at Broadwater Church, Sussex, in August, 1887, being then in his fortieth year; and, as far as intellect is concerned, in his prime.

Since then a monument has been erected to his memory in Salisbury Cathedral, where a few well-chosen words record how his Wiltshire friends and admirers at last learned to regard the poet and naturalist of their fields, and woods, and hills. But a far wider and truer memorial of him lies written in the minds of thousands of admiring readers, who have found delight in "Field and Hedge-row," "The Pageant of Summer," and "The Open Air," as Jefferies had painted them in undying colours. There it will linger for many a day, when the marble slab has grown dim, and dusty, and forgotten. The great regret will be that, though he found peace at last, such a man was neglected and left to toil on, unaided, all through his best years, and perished in his prime. The best of his work, indeed, will endure; and in due time take its place, and that a high one, among the books that are dear to all true lovers of nature.