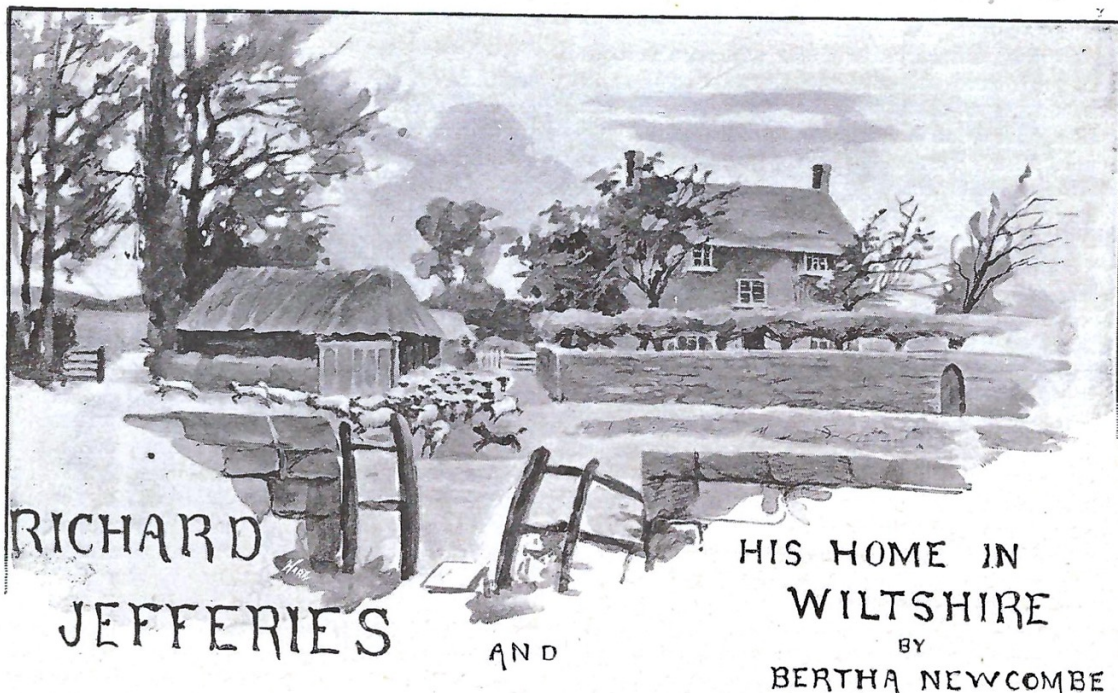




AS the afterglow of interest which lingers round the name of Richard Jefferies grows in intensity, an attractive problem presents itself for consideration—of the reason for his popularity not only amongst the many, but amongst the few. A chatter of delight and an indiscriminate applause are accorded to that mass of matter which fills the several volumes of his country essays. Some people are gluttons; they like to have too much of a good thing, to have information crammed down their throats, and at the same time to enjoy the idle pleasure of identification which a fac-simile of nature placed before their lazy eyes affords them. Swinging the pendulum of criticism too much in the opposite direction, others condemn the charming details and minute observation as “cataloguing.” This is mere captiousness. Although at times there is much wading to be done through short dry notes, apparently just transferred from a note-book, the impression of most of Jefferies “nature” work is of detail elaborated with great care, but ill-adjusted. He lacks the artistic eye which can sacrifice side issues in order to realise his beautiful vision in a becoming atmosphere—in short, the cruelty of choice. He judges himself no whit too hardly in an essay called “Wild Flowers.” “To-day, and day after day, fresh pictures are coloured instantaneously in the retina, as bright and perfect in detail and hue. This very power is often, I think, the cause of pain to me. To see so clearly is to value so highly, and to feel too deeply . . . The eye is for ever drawn onward and finds no end . . . So that it is almost a pain not to be able to cease observing and tracing the untraceable maze of beauty.” Here indeed is the whole secret of the matter. All is

over-stated—“valued too highly.” The perfection of each detail is the undoing of the whole, and the result is only too often a panorama, an attractive show for the multitude, unwinding and recurring, and with none of that spontaneous outpouring which refuses an “encore.”

And yet, taken singly or in smaller groups, how beautiful are his descriptive sentences! What a voluptuous sense of air, colour, and form! The titles of his meditations are full of suggestiveness. What a wealth of sensuous ideas is called at once to the mind by “The Pageant of Summer”! A pageant it should be indeed—with its quick succession of colour a very mosaic of golden dancing lights, and blue and purple shadow, and flashing movement in the warm vibrating air. And yet it is this “Pageant of Summer” which is a justification of what I have said. It leaves no strong impression of splendour and revel. The pageant which we go out to see comes hardly into sight. No vivid fancy quickens this reverie, and, though we do indeed see a wealth of lovely life, it is but a medley of sights and sounds observed meditatively; and, instead of enjoying a fantastic pageant, we stroll aimlessly and long, caressed by languorous air and sunshine, among green fields in fascinating idleness.

As a sharp contrast take the crisp little study called “Golden Brown.” It is almost perfect as a work of art, except for a few needlessly repeated sentences. The strong grip upon the central idea, that warm eulogy of health and colour embodied in the aspect of the rough women, is intensified by the sunny autumnal feeling which enlivens all the pages. An ideal life, the simple life of nature with its sunshine and free air, seems within grasp. But no! not yet. It is but a vain imagining. With a rude

shake the awakening comes, and Jefferies brings his aspirations to a close with a realistic anticlimax, in a scene of dim twilight, the beauty of which protests vainly against the actual brutality, that, with the unfaltering hand of a true artist, he paints relentlessly.

So we pass through the many pages, alternating between admiration and disappointment, charmed, repelled, charmed again, interested,

by one of modern slate, but the garden and orchard remain much the same. It is recognisably described in "Wild Life in a Southern County" and elsewhere. The summer-house where Bevis played and scribbled on the wall still stands, the humble-bees still build their nests in the orchard under the gooseberry trees, lavender bushes grow yet by the gravel walk. On one side of the old orchard waves the mowing

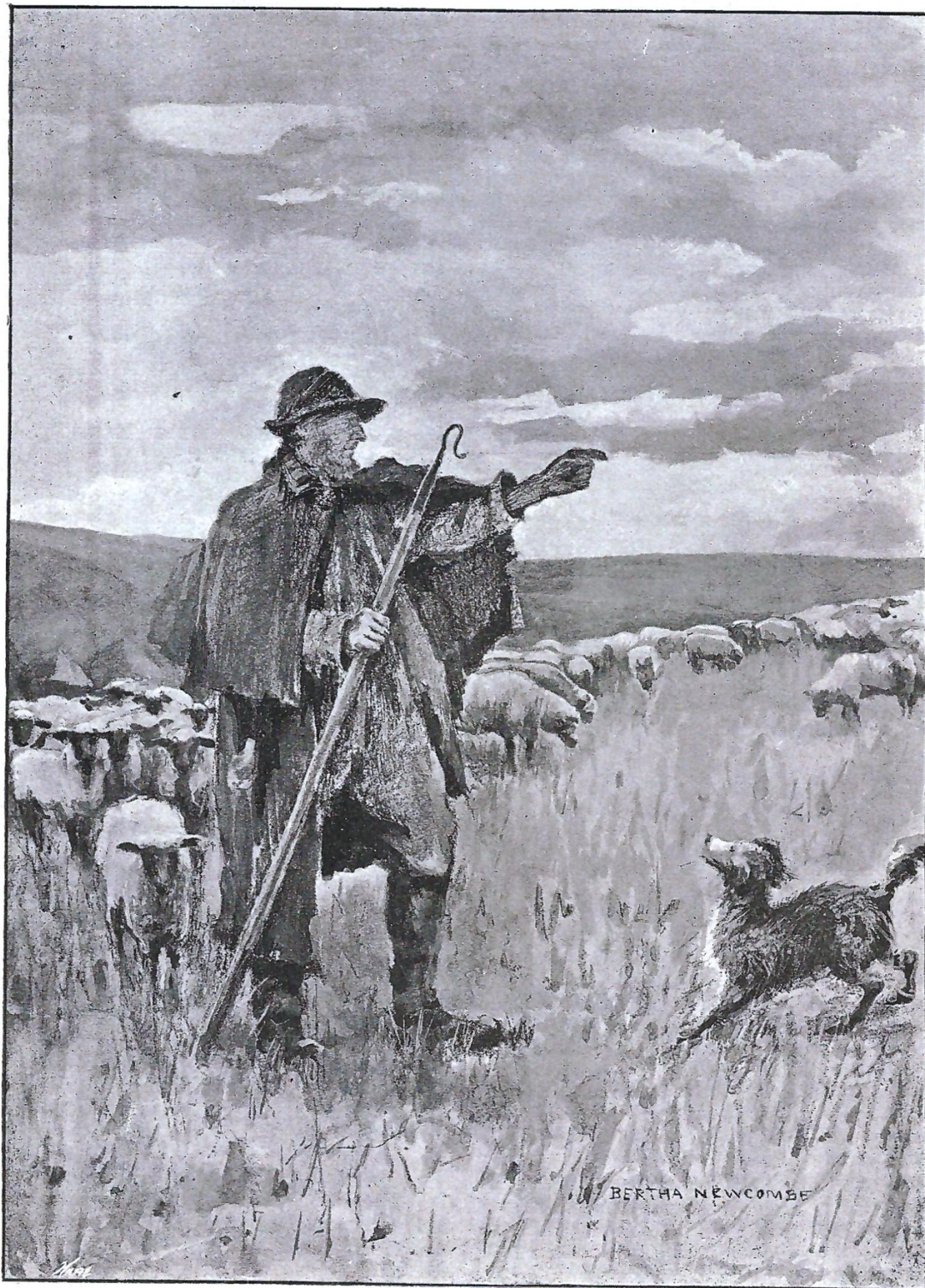


"Sometimes they wheel and circle in fantastic flight over the very brow of the down."

irritated, fascinated by the very uncertainty of the man. We catch glimpses of him in his home and early surroundings in Wiltshire, which he describes over and over again in his novels and essays. His country explains him a great deal. The leafy valley with the little stream, the rich meadows of grass and flowers, the large lake at the back of his home at Coate, are all familiar subjects. The details that he loved are there in abundance, though the near neighbourhood of Swindon, with its large population of workers, does much to spoil the solitude of the surrounding country, and imports "modern improvements." The old farmhouse has lost its thatched roof, and is disfigured

grass, where Amadis and Amaryllis wandered; the other side is shut in by the high wall overhanging by pollard limes; the wall from which Amaryllis looked at her neighbours going to the fair.

Beyond the foot of the lake there is a path which leads through a wood to Hodson's Bottom, a pretty dip of land overlooked by the gamekeeper's cottage. It seems anomalous that Jefferies should have written in praise of game preserving. The evident antagonism shown in "The Dewy Morn," "Amaryllis," and "The Story of my Heart" to the "powers that be," and to the existing social system, has no place here, where all sympathy is for the master and the keeper,



A WILTSHIRE SHEPHERD.

and every appreciation is shown for sport. He has a wholesome contempt for the dishonest poacher, but none for the selfishness which appropriates wild animals for a privileged class, preserves stupid and comparatively uninteresting birds to gratify man's love of slaughter, at the cost of great misery and suffering to the various inhabitants of the woods which are caught in

the cruel traps set by the keepers. Nothing is said of the evils which the system of game-preserving brings in its train—the encouragement of dishonesty by the temptation to transgress a manifestly unjust law, and the manufacture of criminals through that law. It is little wonder that the book is popular. The subject forms an easy peg on which to hang vivid descriptions of

poaching frays, discourses on guns and dogs, backed by talks on woodland life and the varied kingdom of the keeper.

From behind a wall of shyness and reserve Jefferies looks out on the world and society. He is singularly impersonal in his writings, and the autobiographical note is rarely struck. Hence the lack of interest in much of his observation of his fellow-workers. Add to this his want of humour, except a grim smile now and then at their failings, and one can account for such an article as "The Country Sunday," and the dull commonplaces with which he disposes of that most picturesque inhabitant of the down country—the shepherd. The few of the villagers who remember him at Coate do not speak of him with the affection which they accord to other members of his family.

wages as 10s., 11s., and 12s. a week as adequate. His view is entirely that of the farmer. He talks of wages, but never mentions hours in connection with the amount paid, and though alive to the deadening effect of long hours of labour on the men, he removes the responsibility for better payment out of the hands of the master, by pointing out that the very obvious addition to the income of the labourer by the produce of the allotment is a better means of securing him against want.

"The Dewy Morn" was published in 1884, and the growth of ten years is apparent in every page. It is one of the most complete books that Jefferies wrote, with very little of the diffuseness of his country essays, or the disjointedness of *Amaryllis*; and he keeps well to his story, though it is but a slight one. The figure



THE GAMEKEEPER'S COTTAGE.

Like most shy people, he is given at intervals to bursts of confidence, and in his later writings these are more frequent, until at last he pours out his deepest feeling in that great revelation, "The Story of my Heart." With the aid of this autobiography it is possible to make some venture towards the knowledge of the man, and to speculate in what direction his thoughts would have tended had his life been prolonged. The difference of the attitude towards the labouring classes taken in 1872 and 1874, when he wrote certain letters and articles on the Wiltshire labourer, and that of some of his later books, such as *Amaryllis*, is worth attention. In those letters and articles, now collected in a volume, called "Toilers of the Field," he puts together a number of observations on the improvement of the condition of living, the apparent well-being of the cottager, especially in comparison with the small farmer, and the benevolence and good intentions of the landlords and the clergy. He even advocates the system of "tied cottages," and quotes such

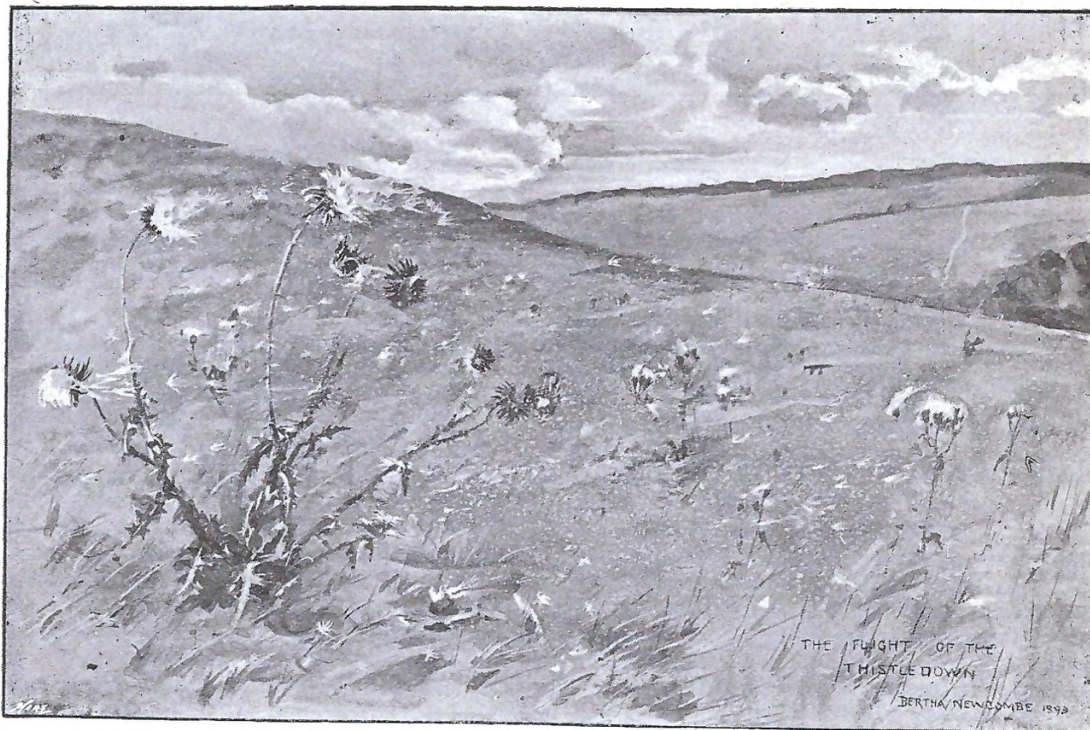
of Felise is a charming centre, which attracts towards itself the other characters, and reveals them to us and to themselves. Her physical beauty is a power which she wields fearlessly, innocent of conventionality. Her free, direct actions, her splendid health and strength, her exquisite shape, embody a realisation of unfettered womanhood. "Felise grew and became yet more beautiful. Her heart too had grown within her—the heart of a woman as it is in its purest nature. She was unconvinced. No specious casuistry of the vain world or the false priest, no argument of the tyrannic science of the nineteenth century, nothing could convince her that the emotion of her heart was wrong. She was unconvinced. All the sophistry and chicanery, all the philosophy and the sociology, all the statutes on the statute book, all the Acts of Parliament, would have utterly failed for one instant to shake that heart, would have failed to convince her that wrong was right, or that a lie was the truth. Felise was unswervingly true to herself."

Though Jefferies has written a novel with a purpose, or with various purposes, it is in no sense "a tract," and, with his real woman as his theme, he allows himself to make excursions into by-paths of speculation and opinion, all of which, however, wait upon his central idea. He condemns unreservedly the chaste and severe attitude of the squire's wife, and appreciates delicately and humanly the morality and immorality of the women of the country-side. He finds a fitting place to discuss the relation of landlord and tenant, the evils of the present system of land tenure, and the tyranny of the master over the labourer. Here he very clearly distinguishes the objection to the "tied cottage" system, which he advocated so warmly ten years before. The book is full of interest, and the whole is set in a delightful "envelope" of sweet scenes of rural life. The opening and ending chapters justify the harmonious title, beginning with a dewy morn of restless desire and hope, and closing with a calm sunrise of contented fulfilment.

From Hodson's Bottom and from Coate Farm, the near downs rise blue beyond the valley, enclosing the lower lands like a fortification, and by the life and air of this country much of "The Story of my Heart" must have been inspired. The broad sweeps, with their simple outlines, are almost symbolical of the far outlook, the longing for fresh "circles of ideas," the ever increasing desire for what is beyond. Each ridge gives an enchanting invitation to search the unrevealed mysteries of its bare height, and thence to travel onwards to newly disclosed beauties. Here is none of the hurry and restlessness of the valley below,

neither is the vision hemmed in as in mountainous districts. The sky is vast, as on the plains of the eastern counties; everywhere the view is unbounded. Dancing over the short-cropped grass flies the freed thistledown, blown on and on by the ever fresh wind. The sloping hillsides and the regular sheep-walks are purple with small scabious, gentian, and wild thyme, and in the patches of cultivated ground the yellow charlock and toad-flax glow in the moving air. From the intrenchment which stands out distinct against the sky, the view over the valley is very extended, and great is the sense of expanse and loneliness. There is little life on the downs except that of the shepherds, and here and there a ploughman and horses. Perhaps a silent shepherd boy lies on the incline, surrounded by his sheep nibbling the short green grass. They wander towards the tempting edges of the reclaimed ground planted with swedes, and he rouses himself and the eager dog to recall them to their permitted pasture. Except for this occasional movement he is still, whistling a popular tune for company, and he smiles vacantly if asked what he thinks of all day. It requires a terribly hard search for an answer to such an unexpected question. Once there came an unexpected answer: "I be thinking of the fine weather."

In wind and rain the shepherd roams the downs, or leans meditatively on his crook or stick, his dark figure and flapping cloak silhouetted against the sky. Late in the afternoon he slowly moves towards the fold, amid a chorus of tuneful sheep-bells, followed by his dog and the hurrying sheep. There is little else to be seen, except the numerous hares feeding, and the



THE FLIGHT OF THE
THISTLEDOWN

BERTHA NEWCOMBE 1894

rabbits running in and out of their burrows, and the birds and the blue butterflies. The rooks gather towards their feeding places in twos and threes or in companies, and with large flights of smaller birds. "As evening approaches, and the rooks begin to wing their way homewards, sometimes a great number of them will alight upon the steep ascent close under the intrenchment on the downs which has been described, and from whence the wood and beech trees where they sleep can be seen.

perfect amphitheatre of green hills. Through these hills there was one narrow groove, or pass, southwards, where the white clouds seemed to close in the horizon. Woods hid the scattered hamlets and farmhouses, so that I was quite alone."

His thought is at times akin to the Eastern one of the annihilation of time and space; the oneness of the world with the soul, the immortality of the present; of the annihilation of the body and mind in order to realise the height of



Sometimes they wheel and circle in fantastic flight over the very brow of the down just above the rampart."

On this summit Jefferies began that strange communing with his soul. "Moving up the sweet, short turf, at every step my heart seemed to obtain a wider horizon of feeling; with every inhalation of rich, pure air a deeper desire. The very light of the sun was whiter and more brilliant here. By the time I had reached the summit I had entirely forgotten the petty circumstances and the annoyances of existence. I felt myself, myself. There was an intrenchment on the summit, and going down into the fosse I walked round it slowly to recover breath. On the south-western side there was a spot where the outer bank had partially slipped, leaving a gap. There the view was over a broad plain beautiful with wheat, and enclosed by a

soul-existence. "I prayed that I might have a soul more than equal to, far beyond my conception of these things of the past, the present, and the fulness of life. Not only equal to these, but beyond, higher, and more powerful than I could imagine. That I might take from all their energy, grandeur, and beauty, and gather it into me. That my soul might be more than the cosmos of life."

He passionately pleads for fresh ideas beyond our circle, and recognises the paralysing influence of "the endless and nameless circumstances of every-day existence, which by degrees build a wall about the mind, so that it travels in a constantly narrowing circle. This tether of the faculties tends to make them accept present knowledge, and present things, as all that can be attained to. This is all—there is nothing more—is the iterated preaching of house-life.

Remain; be content; go round and round in one barren path, a little money, a little food and sleep, some ancient fables, old age, and death."

Again, he bewails the ever-increasing toil for subsistence, condemns the worship of work as a "false superstition," and presses for fresh arrangements of social life in which "the generations which follow may enjoy comparative freedom from useless labours." "Why have millions upon millions to toil from morning to evening just to gain a mere crust of bread? Because of the absolute lack of organisation by which such labour should produce its effect, the absolute lack of distribution, the absolute lack even of the idea that such things are possible. Nay, even to mention such things, to say they are possible, is criminal with many. Madness could hardly go farther." "Food, drink, and clothes are the inalienable right of every child born into the light. If the world does not provide it freely—not as a grudging gift but as a right, as a son of the house sits down to breakfast—then is the world mad. But the world is not mad, only in ignorance—an interested ignorance, kept up by strenuous exertions, from which infernal darkness it will in course of time emerge, marvelling at the past as a man wonders at and glories in the light who has escaped from blindness."

Jefferies' last book, "Amaryllis at the Fair," seems to have been born at a period of new awakening. It is a surprising production after the completer works that he had so lately published: full of youth even to callowness, and yet bitter from the pressure of circumstances and the indifference of the outer world. It seems as though he were bewildered with the many paths opening before him, and, conscious of the near approach of death, he starts hurriedly upon them one after the other, without being able to follow them to the end. It is a list of deeply felt injustices, of anger against the world in general, against the pressure of poverty on the budding growth of mind and character, against the friction caused by need. On each of his well-drawn characters the pressure rests: on Iden with his strong intellect which finds no scope, his intense pride and his love of honest work; on Mrs. Iden, who slaves and scolds and rages in her impotence to push



matters in the way she wishes, and who yet cherishes her little hidden remnant of romance; on Amaryllis herself, who looks at the world with all the ignorance and severity of youth, "a wilful and rebellious revolutionist." The book is a marred idyll crammed with delicate material, and hardly held together by the spirit of irritation and revolt against the bondage of circumstances which overrides all.

Jefferies was ill at ease with the world: at war with modern civilisation and its consequent barbarism. Had he perhaps been stronger in health and less hampered by the struggle for existence, he would probably have been less reserved and more genial towards those with whom at heart he sympathised. His, however, was a delightful imperfection, full of infinite possibilities. He saw so clearly the wrong construction of society; the injustice that, in a world of plenty, heaps that plenty into the hands of a few, and holds the majority at their mercy. His longing to share his aspirations after soul-life with his fellow-men was not realised. He is a plea for re-incarnation, for a further existence to bring forth and mature those conceptions many of which are only now quivering with the beginning of life.

