

RICHARD JEFFERIES

BY HENRY WILLIAMSON

I

THERE was once a poor man who in moments of inspiration believed himself to be a prophetic thinker and writer of the world. The world did not think so. He died half a century ago, worn out at the age of thirty-eight. During the later part of his life he was ill as well as poor; and two years before his death he lived in perpetual agony. Some doctors thought his illness was imaginary; that he was a hypochondriac; that the wasting away of his body and the perpetual pains he suffered were due to hysteria. Actually he suffered from tuberculosis of the lungs and intestines, and the intestines were ulcerated as well. Also he had fistula, which is a most torturing thing. All during his life he was working; and the theme of his work was the creation of, the burning hope for, a better, truer, more sunlit world of men.

Richard Jefferies was the son of a Wiltshire farmer. He was a genius, a visionary whose thought and feeling were wide as the human world, prophet of an age not yet come into being — the age of sun, of harmony. He was derided in his father's house, upbraided for idleness and stupidity; considered 'loony' by the neighbors. Since a man can be truly friends with his peers only, Jefferies was friendless to his life's end.

During his boyhood and youth he lived at Coate Farm, in the parish of Chisledon, near Swindon. The farm lay under the chalk downs. Behind the

farmhouse were trees, and then a broad sheet of water, with reeds and rushes and wild fowl, and two islets near the shore. Pike lived in there, with roach and rudd and perch, and other fish. From his boyhood memories of this place the best boys' book in England was written — *Bevis: The Story of a Boy*.

After his death, there was some controversy about whether or no he died a Christian. His life's work was indignantly attacked in the *Girls' Own Paper*. This was stupid; and it was wicked. Stupidity is the same thing as wickedness, or the devil, to this modern age of half-sun. It was wicked because it denied and persecuted the truth of heaven. During his lifetime Jefferies had to fight against much ununderstanding; and it wore him to an early death.

The affinity of Jefferies with Jesus of Nazareth is patent in nearly all his work. If Francis of Assisi is a little brother of the birds, Jefferies of Wiltshire is a little brother of Jesus, of the sun, of clarity, of all things fine and natural and designed and efficient. Jefferies saw with paradise-clearness.

The century that slew him passed away, and still he remained insufficiently esteemed. The following is typical. Thirty-three years after his death, when I was a reporter in Fleet Street, I was talking to an old literary gentleman about Jefferies. It was in

Carmelite House, then the home of Lord Northcliffe's newspapers. It was a wearing life, for men of sensibility. The old chap was a special writer for an evening paper; he was a scholar whose writings were famous to a small circle only, and to first-edition collectors. He was always violently bitter about the British public. 'Don't try and write for a living; keep pigs,' was his immediate reply to the young aspirant who approached him timidly in the little room, always lit by artificial light, where he worked. He waved hand and arm in a sweep of derision of the whole building. Then he began rolling Latin verse off his tongue. His tie was always askew around his tall 1890 collar. Red-faced, big-headed, he looked like a monk with his long white bobbed hair almost touching the shoulders of his cloak.

I felt it a privilege to hear this famous writer talk like that. I had bought some of his books, but had dipped into them only, and never finished them. The famous prose did not stand out of the pages. One day, meeting him again in the corridor, I dared to ask if he liked the works of Richard Jefferies. 'Jefferies? A mere cataloguer of sights and sounds,' he replied, and had nothing more to say, and I knew then what I had suspected, that he had not that *something* that marks out a writer of genius from the writer who is scholarly, pretentious, literary, whose work is a gilt of borrowed gold, imitation of poetic vision. (This was probably youthful intolerance; for he was a passionate writer.) When I saw him coming along a passage, I used to turn away and hide. He had called my Jefferies a 'mere cataloguer.'

During the sixteen years that have passed since the advice to keep pigs (advice which I am ready to take now) I have collected various opinions of Jefferies by other writers, with the intention of quoting them in an essay

on his work, to show why those derogatory or disprizing remarks were merely an indication of a lack in the writers themselves: such lack going hand-in-hand with their non-success as writers with the general public. But it is not worth doing.

The works of D. H. Lawrence, another writer who has much in common with Jefferies, contain many portraits of his detractors or non-appreciators, all of them arising from Lawrence's own tortured sensibility. Such writing is a mistake. It is not truly creative. The writer should shine on his characters with the serenity of the sun.

II

Jefferies was born two, perhaps three, generations before his time. In May 1925, nearly forty years after his death, I made a journey to his birthplace, and stared at the farmhouse where he had been born, at the gable window from which he had looked when writing his first pages. I walked round the broad or lake, and thought how much smaller it was than in *Bevis*. It had been made into a public bathing place, with huts and rails and diving boards; but the fish were still there. There was talk of turning the farmhouse into a Jefferies museum, for a memorial. Soon nothing, I thought, would be left of the place as he knew it, except in those pages of his which glowed and shone with ancient sunlight.

While I was musing thus, standing in the roadway before the farm, an old woman came out of a small cot of tarred wood, obviously the work of a laboring man, and scrutinized me. The little black house stood under a hawthorn, then in pink blossom. 'Come to see the house where Loony Dick was born, have ye?' she inquired. We talked for some time. She was remarkable for her vivacity and straight way of looking at things. Years before the war she had

adopted a foundling or waif from the Union or workhouse; raised him as her own child, found him a job when grown up; and then the war came, and killed him. What she could not make up her mind about at the moment, she told me, was whether or not to adopt another 'chiel.' There were plenty of 'm about, she declared, since the soldiers had gone. Was she too old, did I think? I said surely not, that she had many years to live. Don't ye be too sure, she said, and defied me to guess her age. 'Sixty?' I said. 'Git out,' she replied; 'I knew Loony Dick as a boy, did n't I tell 'ee just now? "Moony Dick," some called him. A lazy loppet, he was, too. A proper atheist. Lots of folks asks me if I have read those books. Why should I read them? I know it all as well as he. He can't tell me anything new. I've had to work all my life. Why should I read in books what most folks knows already?'

(After his death, a relative wrote of Jefferies as a boy, 'Dick was of a masterful temperament, and though less strong than several of us in a bodily sense, his force of will was such that we had to succumb to whatever plans he chose to dictate, never choosing to be second even in the most trivial thing.')

All the strain and desperation in much of Jefferies's writings, and his sickness and premature death, can be traced to the human surroundings of his childhood, youth, and early manhood. Those who called him, to his face, Loony Dick or Lazy Loppet, who laughed at his aspirations and derided his early efforts to be a writer, were to him so narrow and warped and ruined that he could say nothing to them. The poor boy with the instincts of an aristocrat shut himself away from them; he lived in books, and wandered on the downs, spreading himself in the air and grass and sky until he was recharged with vitality and hope, and made eager

once again for a fuller, a happier life for all the warped and ruined human minds he saw about him in both the slums of Swindon and his own hamlet.

After he had left school, the young Jefferies, a mixture of indolence and sharp imperiousness, got a job on a local paper, the *North Wilts Herald*. At night he wrote novels and romances in the seclusion of the gable room, which had a pear tree trained against the outer wall. *Cæsar Borgia*, or *The King of Crime*; *Verses on the Exile of the Prince Imperial*; *Fortune*, or *The Art of Success* (he sent this to Disraeli, who returned it with a tactfully insincere letter); *Only a Girl* — how he worked, burning candle after candle into midnight and dawn.

Work on a country newspaper is good training for a young writer. There is not the hurried pressure and thwarting of nervous energy as in supplying small and often silly news stories for Fleet Street newspapers; there is no perpetual callousing and humiliation of feelings, no distortion of truth in the manufacture of 'news.' A country newspaper is usually tactful, kindly, and its detail truthful. The meticulous gathering of names and facts of the little things of country life — the more names the better for the circulation of the paper — may be dull at times; but it is not degrading. And the young Jefferies was fortunate in having a sympathetic editor who believed that his young reporter had a distinct talent for writing.

This editor's belief was justified when, at the age of twenty-four, Jefferies wrote a long letter to *The Times* in London; and *The Times* printed it in full, several thousand words, about the Wiltshire Laborer. It was read and discussed in Swindon; the writer became a local figure. His chance! He found himself, suddenly, to be an authority on agriculture.

Imagine the tall, loose-limbed young man striding home from Swindon, paler than usual, the large blue eyes in the softly brown-bearded face almost lifeless in the reaction of excitement, entering his father's house with an added lassitude of his drooping mouth and narrow shoulders, to stand about, silently, almost dully, and say casually, 'My letter's in.' 'What letter, Dick?' asks his mother, ironing on the kitchen table. 'In the paper.' 'The *Standard*? It's early this week, is n't it?' 'No, not that. I mean *The Times*.' His mother glances at it, and puts it down, while her son waits like a hawk for what she will not say. She says she is too busy just now, but will read it later; and he goes up into his room beside the cheese loft, and flops down in his chair, and feels more desperately than ever the awful deadness and dullness of house life and 'civilized' people. They will never understand. After supper he has violent indigestion, and cannot write a word of the new novel.

But he has begun. One day they will know what their son is.

III

In those days, before compulsory schooling taught almost everyone to read, there were in England newspapers and periodicals which were written almost entirely by knowledgeable, or professional, writers. Among them were *Fraser's Magazine*, the *New Quarterly*, the *Standard*, the *Graphic*, the *Pall Mall Gazette*, the *Fortnightly*, the *Gentleman's Magazine*, *Longman's Magazine*, the *National Review*, the *English Illustrated Magazine*, and others. The editors of these papers and magazines, attracted by the letter in *The Times*, began to ask for and to print Jefferies's essays. A London evening newspaper, the *Pall Mall Gazette*, published a series of his articles, anonymously, under the title of *The Game-*

keeper at Home, or Sketches of Natural History and Rural Life; and then another series, *Wild Life in a Southern County*. When these were reprinted in book form, Jefferies was acclaimed as a writer in the class of White of Selborne, and a public of discriminating sportsmen and country people began to look out for everything he wrote.

He was married now, to the daughter of a neighboring farmer, and had a son. After the wedding the young couple had lived at Coate Farm, but soon found that life there was not possible; the ideas of the old people smothered the inspiration of the young author. So they took rooms in Swindon. Then, to be nearer editors, they moved to the suburbs of London, first to Sydenham and then to Surbiton. He worked every day; and the work of this period was always on a high level — informative and of the authentic countryside. Sometimes it was inclined to be static; for he had to write every day to support wife and family. It was then that other lesser writers began to use the label 'cataloguer.'

Most young writers who have had a sudden success ease up for a while, and thereby lose their form. Not so Jefferies. He wrote as before, novels and essays. In a recent critical appreciation of Jefferies, by a living writer who is also a Wiltshire man, I was shocked to read the opinion that all the Jefferies novels could be 'thrown into the wastepaper basket.' But there are some beautiful things in the novels, even in the very early ones, when Jefferies was writing of scenes or incidents he had observed. Most of the early novels have scenes and characters based on what he had read in boyhood and youth; novels based on the fictional idiom of the day, and therefore blind or conventional writing. But among the novels are the exquisite *Greene Ferne Farm*, and *The Dewy Morn*, and *Amaryllis at the Fair*, one of the most lovely calm

and balanced novels of country life and people in our literature. There is a naturalness, a bloom on *Amaryllis* which is not to be found in any of the novels of Hardy or the books of Hudson; and Hardy in the authenticity and detail of his country scenes is in the very rare first class with Shakespeare.

What is meant by the term 'very rare first class'? Let me try to explain this as a thing occurring in certain men and women; and why it happens. This is only what one man thinks, remember; it may be true only in part, or it may be wholly wrong. Nevertheless, it may indicate why the lives of so many men of genius are tragic. This is my belief:

The base or foundation of a first-class talent is eyesight. The man who sees more, who perceives quicker than his fellows, is of larger intelligence only by reason of that superior sight. Some people, educated unnaturally, seldom see for themselves; they don't know why things happen in the way they do: that every effect has a cause. An observant person is never stupid. Wisdom is the essence of observation.

The first-class writer always has first-class eyes. Often he is solitary from his companions in youth because they do not see so quickly or so widely as he does; and therefore do not think so quickly, or so plainly; and tend to ridicule what to them is not usual or ordinary.

It is as wretched for a slow-seeing person to be with a quick-seeing person, after the fact of difference has been established, as it is for the quick one to be with the slow one. Jefferies knew no one like himself, so he kept by himself. The derision and smallness of his fellows sealed him away from them; he was forced into solitude, where his enlarged and numerous faculties watched the actions of other life — clouds, grass, birds, fish, and natural men. He began to perceive why things happened; and reacted violently from conventional re-

ligion because it did not perceive how things happened. He judged religion by its ordinary exponents: the unintelligent mediocrity, men with minds spoiled in early life. In his lonely meditations on the downs he thought about the people in the houses and fields below, and wondered how their lives could be made happier. In such solitude it was inevitable that he should strain to perceive or discover the meaning of life: to strain after that meaning, to try to force his thought through space to a definite meaning.

Later, the sight-records of what he had seen in those early days were used for reproduction on paper.

In the world of men speech came before writing: sound of words before sight of words. The first-rate writer always has a fine ear. He may be deaf in later life; but when young he must have *heard* acutely, as well as have *seen*, unconsciously to prepare the quality and substance of his writing. He writes by ear, balancing his sentences, sometimes automatically but usually deliberately, for their *inner* music, which is the essence of life. It is an alchemic process, a spirit arising from a blend of transmuted sight-records and ear-records.

If you consider a moment, sight is responsible for almost all of the human world as it is to-day. So is sight the foundation of nearly all literature. (Mr. Robert Graves, himself a fine, austere poet, once declared that Keats had an unusually developed sense of taste — 'And lucent syrops, tinct with cinnamon.'))

Some of the villagers in Ham, where I lived during the first decade after the World War, possessed copies of an old romantic novel with most of its scenes laid on the coast and country of North Devon. Someone lent me a copy, and I read first the descriptions of those places in the district I knew. They were accurate, and yet somehow they were

insufficient, unsatisfying. It was not the style, which was no better and no worse than that of a hundred other novels of its period. The descriptions were somehow so bare, so colorless, although the fields were green, the sea was blue, the sands yellow, and so on. The book was pallid, unsunned. In my youthful intolerance I scorned the book; until I learned that the author had been blind from birth.

All writing of the first class comes from exceptional sight and hearing; and insight arises from stored physical impressions of sight and sound. Those who observe quickly and vividly hold us with their detail, which is fresh and vivid; and they hold our attention because, being quick and vivid, their stories or pages have a flow which carries the reader. Now the rare first-class writer has, in addition to keen sight and hearing (it may be because of them), feelings or emotions which are equally keen. He has the keenness of a wild animal. He is natural. He is an authentic animation of the sun.

And because he is wild, natural, it is probable that he will be repressed and thwarted and made miserable in helpless childhood. This may cause him to be an ineffectual rebel, a liar, a bit of a thief, deceitful — if he has parents or mentors who, themselves victims of a repressive and unnatural upbringing, are without true or natural understanding and sympathy. Part of his natural integrity will thus be maimed; and that part will grow inwards, and perhaps mortify, and be the source of desperately sad resurrectional poetry and dream and vision later in life. This is what happened to Shelley, to Byron, to Francis Thompson, to Shakespeare (who outgrew his Hamlet), to Jefferies, to D. H. Lawrence, among many others in our literature.

It can be said of all of them, facilely, superficially, that they have a dual or multiple personality; but the truth, or

cause, is as written above. Jefferies has two distinct styles. One of them is straightforward and concrete: the style of a natural man. The other is a candid, and often incandescent, flow of words driven from him, as he wrote, by his dæmon (in Shelleyan language): the dæmon being his repressed or mortified self. It is this part of a man that strives to reach to God: the death, or mortification, in him striving to overcome his life.

Because of these two distinct styles, both of them authentic, Jefferies has two kinds of reading public. The one appreciates his straightforward descriptions of country scenes and characters, such as are to be found in *The Amateur Poacher*, *Wild Life in a Southern County*, and *Hodge and His Masters*; and this kind of reader does not like *The Story of My Heart* and the later essays wherein he wrote about himself and his own feelings. And there is the second kind of reader, who is pathologically akin to Jefferies, who prefers his introspective, sensuous writings to his matter-of-fact chapters.

It is always dangerous for a writer to write about himself and his own feelings; but when there is an intensity and power behind them he produces a flow, a blend of sensuous records with emotion; and this is called poetry.

If circumstances or fate permits the metaphysical poet to outgrow the effects of his early mortifications, and through natural love, accompanied by hard physical work (the natural life), to reassert himself to himself, he will become one of the rare first class, like Shakespeare, who, by virtue of his own experiences, real and imagined, understood all human actions and characters with clarity and the sweetness of truth. The rare first-class writer is then a universal representative of humanity, having attained wisdom by trial and error, by discarding parts of his earlier self through struggle and self-searching,

and, above all, by self-criticism. So he achieves natural harmony; and thenceforward will have no regard for his writings, — as a butterfly has no regard for the caterpillar, — but wish only to live happily; and, if he writes at all, will write only for money. Jefferies had just become a writer of the rare first class when the struggle broke him.

IV

Such men are born leaders of men; but early circumstance drives them within themselves, and out of that inner mortification, from their own slain image, they strive to re-create the world. A visionary poet is a frustrated man of action. The natural poet, a very rare thing, is joyous and therefore the friend of all, the born leader, the truly civilized man. The visionary poet, the philosopher striving that future men shall not suffer in childhood as he suffered, the little brother of Jesus (the man of sorrows and acquainted with grief), writes, out of his enlarged and maimed senses, that children of the future shall be happy: that the sun shall shine on all men equably.

Richard Jefferies, the Wiltshire farmer's son, perceived this; and formulated much of it into words half a century before the World War, by whose glare and shock men began to perceive, beyond the faults of their past lives and education and upbringing and conventions and limitations, the idea of a new world, a natural world, a world wherein men would be happy because of the new wideness of thought arising, phoenix-like, from the mortifying battlefields. Of this world there have been many prophets, whose thought arises into life from faraway centuries and civilizations; and the greatest of them is Jesus of Nazareth. This was the realization of Richard Jefferies during the last days of his life: the attar of his wisdom.

Thus for the mind of Jefferies.

And of the dying man himself, what can be said? He wrote, in his last year, 'Three giants are against me — disease, despair, and poverty.'

My wearied and exhausted system constantly craves rest. My brain is always asking for rest. I never sleep. I have not slept now for five years properly, always waking, with broken bits of sleep, and restlessness, and in the morning I get up more weary than I went to bed. Rest, that is what I need. You thought naturally that it was work I needed; but I have been at work, and next time I will tell you all of it. It is not work, it is *rest* for the brain and the nervous system. I have always had a suspicion that it was the ceaseless work that caused me to go wrong at first.

It has taken me a long time to write this letter; it will take you but a few minutes to read it. Had you not sent me to the sea in the spring I do not think that I should have been alive to write it.

An artist friend has described his physical end in words that can hardly be read, by those who love Jefferies's work, without tears.

It was in the early summer, two or three months before his death, that I saw Jefferies for the last time alive. He had then been living at Goring for some short time, and this was my first visit to him there. I was pleased to find that his house was far pleasanter than the dreary and bleak cottage which he had rented at Crowborough. It had a view of the sea, a warm southern exposure, and a good and interesting garden: in one corner a quaint little harbour, with a pole and vane, and near this centre a genuine old-fashioned draw-well. Poor fellow! Painfully, with short breathing, and supported on one side by Mrs. Jefferies and on the other by myself, he walked round this enclosure, noticing and drawing our attention to all kinds of queer little natural objects and facts. Between the well and the harbour was a heap of rough, loose stones, overgrown by various creeping flowers. This was the home of a common snake, discovered there by Harold, and poor Jefferies stood, supported by us, a yard or so away and peered into every little cranny and un-

der every leaf with eyes well used to such a search until some tiny gleam, some minute cold glint of light, betrayed the snake. Weakness and pain seemed forgotten for the moment — alas! only for the moment.

Uneasily he sat in the little arbour telling me how his disease seemed still to puzzle the doctors; how he felt well able in mind to work, plenty of mental energy, but so weak, *so fearfully weak*, that he could no longer write with his own hand; that his wife was patient and good to help him. He had nobody to come and talk with him of the world of literature and art. Why could n't I come and settle by? There was plenty to paint. Though Goring itself was one of the ugliest places in the world, there was Arundel, and its noble park, and river, and castle close by. I must go and see it the very next day, and see whether I could not work there, and come back every day and cheer him. I was the best doctor, after all.

Poor fellow! I did not then know or believe that he was so utterly without sympathetic society except his devoted wife. It was so. I am one of the dullest companions in the world; but I had sympathy with his work, and knowledge, too, of his subjects. Well, nothing would do but that I must go to Arundel the next day, and Mrs. Jefferies must show me the town. 'He would do well enough for one day. A good neighbour would come in, and with little Phyllis and the maid he would be safe.'

Therefore we went to Arundel (a short journey by train), and on coming back

found him standing against the door-post to welcome us.

I have seldom been more touched than by my experience of that evening, finding, amongst other things, that he had partly planned and insisted on this Arundel trip to get us away so that he might, unrebuked, spend some of his latest hard earnings in a pint of 'Perrier Jouët' for my supper.

Do you know Goring churchyard? It is one of those dreary, overcrowded, dark spots where the once-gravelled paths are green with slimy moss, and it was a horror to poor Jefferies. More than once he repeated the hope that he might not be laid there, and he chose the place where his widow at last left him — amongst the brighter grass and flowers of Broadwater.

He died at Goring at half-past two on Sunday morning, August 14, 1887. His soul was released from a body wasted to a skeleton by six long weary years of illness. For nearly two years he had been too weak to write, and all his delightful work, during that period, was written by his wife from his dictation. Who can picture the torture of these long years to him, denied as he was the strength to walk so much as one hundred yards in the world he loved so well? What hero like this, fighting with Death face to face so long, fearing and knowing, alas! too well, that no struggles could avail, and, worse than all, that his dear ones would be left friendless and penniless. Thus died a man whose name will be first, perhaps for ever, in his own special work.