The Eulogy of Richard Jefferies[1]

Alexander H. Japp, LL.D. .
https://archive.org/details/gentlemansmagaz229unkngoog/page/n256

First published in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, March 1889, Vol.266 pp.253–262.

The very excellence of Mr. Jefferies' writing has set him at a great disadvantage in view of general readers. He was not an observer of nature intent on practical purposes, direct or indirect, but a poet who aimed at interpretation of her higher aspects. Much as his art depended on the eye, it depended yet more on imagination, as allied with that kind of sympathy which ever calls the ear into close alliance. He listened as well as looked; and the sense of the under-current of music conveyed by his writing—the secret rhythm and mystery which it constantly suggests—forms the charm to all those who truly admire his works and enter into his spirit. Just as an indefinable atmosphere enters into and pervades all great landscapes, so he caught and preserved in his style the atmosphere, the secret, subtle, indescribable something which, after all, remains outside the senses, though the senses only find their full enchantment in the lull and feeling of restful self-absorption which it inevitably brings with it. One of the inseparable accompaniments of the mood is wonder—knowledge touched with wonder is the note of such an interpreter.

Strictly, we have, in all such cases, a revelation of the soul of the interpreter as well as of nature; the man who can rise into such sympathy or identification with nature is, perforce, an egotist, though of the highest and noblest type, and his record is, in the last result, a confession. Nature's retired scenes are his shrines; there he worships. To her in her temples of conciliation and reconciliation—fields, woods, stream-sides, retiring hedgerows, and lordly hills—he makes his confession, that he, in turn, may become a priest and a confessor for others. The commonest bit of earth is enough for him, if the priestly mood be upon him; and the wavering gleams of sunset are as the coals of fire to the altar which consumes the sacrifice.

In the most ordinary piece of description from Mr. Jefferies' pen there is the suggestion of this consecration—a religious sentiment, a worship—the unity of things stands out; we feel that he opens up to us a new world of beauty and wonder unseen of mortal eye, though words may suggest it. Such a work as *The Story of My Heart* is the final crown of such study and faithful record; it seems to be connected with all that went before by tendrils that pulsate with the sap they carry; the loftiest points in them seem as the foundations on which this

[1] *The Eulogy of Richard Jefferies*, by Walter Besant, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1888.)

other rests—the stepping-stones by which the author has raised himself to the stage whereon he can safely give utterance to his most personal and holy thoughts, and yet speak to us in accents of the most simple and sincere personal experience.

'Knowledge *touched with wonder*'. We have set this down as *the* note of such a teacher and interpreter. We trust our readers will forgive us if we attempt to show, by a comparison of Mr. Jefferies with another great man recently deceased, what we mean. For Mr. Darwin we cherish nothing but the most grateful and profound admiration, and no word shall come from us to discredit in any way his vast and varied attainments, and the great benefits he has conferred on science by his most patient researches and his constant and steady observation, any more than we shall forget to do justice to his real warmth of heart, his native tenderness, mildness, and amiability. But in him we have the pure observer—the man who notes the fact only for purposes of arrangement, for systematisation, for the sake of and in hope of more knowledge. He disclaims wonder, he repudiates mystery; the sense of awe, of fervent worship, of mystery and of divine revelation are far from him. With the frank and childlike sincerity which was so fine a trait in Mr. Darwin's character, we have his own clear and definite confession on this point given to us in his 'Memoir,' as it lies more and more explicit in his books towards the end of his laborious life. The influence of scientific research, even on so good a man, was purely disintegrating. He looked so closely that he could not took around or above, and even the facts themselves were not seen in affinity but only in superficial relation.

We are told in the *Life* that when in maturer years he recalled the feelings of wonder and awe and admiration and devotion with which in younger days he had looked at the beauty and grandeur of a Brazilian forest, he marvelled at himself, and actually wrote: 'Now the grandest scenes would not cause any such convictions or feelings to rise in my mind. It may be truly said that I am like a man who has become colour-blind'. (*Life*, vol.i., p.311).

And again: 'Up to the age of thirty, or beyond it, poetry of many kinds, such as the works of Milton, Byron, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley, gave me great delight, and even as a school-boy I took intense delight in Shakespeare. I have also said that formerly pictures gave me considerable, and music very great delight. But now, for many years, I cannot endure to read a line of poetry. I have also lost my taste for pictures and music.' (*Life*, vol.i., p.101).

So the process was, at all events, not broadening but narrowing. The larger interests of life fell into the background, shrunk, and finally became lost altogether. The sweet humanities preserved to us from other ages by literature and art were no longer links in the chain of development—gave no hint of wider, fuller horizon. The avenues of delight associated with them were irrevocably closed.

The colour-blindness thus had its own effect on his views, not only of the destiny of the human race, but of man's descent, and not only of his descent, but of his claim to rank in any essential way above the animal life around, that never questions or wonders or realises itself as separate from and above the mere material elements by which it is surrounded and in which it is involved. Would any of us trust in the convictions of a monkey's mind? he seriously asks, and goes on to say, 'The doubt always arises whether the convictions of man's mind, which has been developed from the mind of the lower animals, are of any value.' (*Life*, vol.i., p.316). As he has himself ceased to wonder, to reverence, to feel any awe in presence of the universe, he chooses to ignore the existence of those elements in man which do definitely differentiate him from the animals and mere material nature around him; for the fact that man does instinctively wonder, and look up, and question, and seek solution of problems, and stretch out arms of appeal in moments of deep distress and trial, and yearn for some nearer approach to something felt to be divine, is just as much a fact of human nature—the Scotch philosophers would have called it a primary fact of human consciousness—as that men in common with other animals breathe, and have five senses, and eat and digest, and sleep and wake. Mr. Darwin, in the very fact that he could recall a past and record it, if he did not mourn it, gave the lie to his dogmatic position, and wrote the most damning evidence against the tendencies of his favourite science as at war with the broad facts of human nature and its higher and better aspirations. Who, indeed, that thinks of the matter with any healthfulness, and with sympathies still alive and responsive to the appeals of nature, can but endorse these words of Miss Power Cobbe in her recent volume?

> What shall it profit a man if he discover the origin of species, and know exactly how earth-worms and sundews conduct themselves, if all the while he grow blind to the loveliness of nature, deaf to music, insensible to poetry, and is unable to lift his soul to the Divine and Eternal as was the primeval ape from whom he has descended? Is this all that science can do for her devotee? Must he be shorn of the glory of humanity when he is ordained her priest? Does he find all his loftier faculties atrophied when he has become a 'machine for grinding general laws out of large collections of facts'[2]... To collect a million of facts, test them, classify them, raise by induction generalisations regarding them, and hand them down to the next generation to add a few thousand more facts, and (probably) to reconstruct the pyramid on a different basis and another plan—if this be indeed to arrive at 'Truth,' modem science may boast she has reached the goal. Yet in other days Truth was deemed something nobler than this. It was the interests which lay behind and beyond the facts, their possible bearing on man's deepest yearnings and sublimest hopes, which gave dignity and meaning to the humblest researches into rock and plant, and which glorified such discoveries as Kepler's, till he cried in rapture, 'O God, I think Thy thoughts after Thee,' and Newton's, till he closed the

[2] Said to himself by Darwin, *Life*, vol.i, p.182.

'Principia' (as Parker said of him) by 'bursting into the Infinite and kneeling there.' In our time, however, science has repeatedly renounced all pretension to throw light in any direction beyond the sequence of physical causes and effects; and by doing so she has, I think, abandoned her claim to be man's guide to Truth. The Alpine traveller who engages his guides to scale the summit of the Jungfrau and finds them stop to booze in the Wirthschaft at the bottom, would have no better right to complain than those who fondly expected science to bring them to God, and are informed that she now never proceeds above the Ascidian. So long as all the rivulets of laws traced by science flowed freshly onwards towards the sea, our souls drank of them with thankfulness. Now that they lose themselves in the sands, they have become mere stagnant pools of knowledge.[3]

Now, in one aspect, and a most important one, Mr. Richard Jefferies in his first fresh contact with nature recovers for us the links of relation which men like Mr. Darwin are constantly wearing away, until at last they snap, and leave us, as it were, stranded and desolate, robbed of the sense of light and freedom, far away from that Palace of Delight which is the home of childhood, and should be the home, too, of whole-hearted, healthy, enduring men, from which they reap the best refreshment and also their best incentive to good acts, 'those little unremembered acts of kindness and of love,' as Wordsworth puts it. It is, in a word, the hymn of the soul, which, set to nature as to an instrument, brings out its whole tones, its clear and unmistakable revelations of the immensity which lies beyond, and of which it is but a part.

I have only just commenced to realise the immensity of thought which lies outside the knowledge of the senses, Still, on the hills and on the seashore. I seek and pray deeper than ever. The sun bums southwards over the sea and before the wave turns its shadow, constantly slipping on the advancing slope till it curls and covers its dark image at the shore. Over the rim of the horizon are flowing as high and wide as those that break upon the beach. These that come to me and beat the trembling shore are like the thoughts that have been known so long; like the ancient, iterated, reiterated thoughts that have broken on the strand of mind for thousands of years. Beyond and over the horizon I feel that there are other waves of ideas unknown to me, flowing as the stream of ocean flows. Knowledge of facts is limitless; they lie at my feet innumerable, like the countless pebbles; knowledge of thought so circumscribed! Even the same thoughts come that have been written down centuries and centuries.

Let me launch forth and sail over the rim of the sea yonder, and when another rim rises over that, and again and onwards into an ever-widening ocean of idea and life. For with all the strength of the wave, and its succeeding wave, the depth and race of the tide, the clear definition of the sky; with all the subtle power of the great sea, there rises an equal desire. Give me life strong and full as the brimming ocean; give me thoughts wide as its plain; give me a soul beyond these. Sweet is the bitter sea by the shore where the faint blue pebbles are lapped by the green-grey wave, where the wind-quivering foam is loath to leave the lashed stone. *Sweet is*

[3] *The Scientific Spirit of the Age*, pp.17–19.

the bitter sea and the clear green in which the gaze seeks the soul, looking through the glass into itself. The sea thinks for me as I listen and ponder; the sea thinks, and every boom of the wave repeats my prayer.

Sometimes I stay on the wet sands as the tide rises, listening to the rush of the lines of foam in layer upon layer; the wash swells and circles about my feet; I have my hands in it, I lift a little in my hollowed palm, I take the life of the sea to me. My soul, rising to the immensity, utters its desire-prayer with all the strength of the sea. Or, again, the full stream of ocean beats upon the shore, and the rich wind feeds the heart; the sun burns brightly—the sense of soul-life burns in me like a torch.

Leaving the shore, I walk among the trees: a cloud passes, and the sweet, short rain comes mingled with sunbeams and flower-scented air. The finches sing among the fresh green leaves of the beeches. Beautiful it is, in summer days, to see the wheat wave, and the long grass foam-flecked of flower yield and return to the wind. My soul of itself always desires; these are to it as fresh food. I have found in the hills another valley grooved in prehistoric times, where, climbing to the top of the hollow, I can see the sea. Down in the hollow I look up; the sky stretches over, the sun burns as it seems but just above the hill, and the wind sweeps onward. As the sky extends beyond the valley, so I know that there are ideas beyond the valley of my thought. I know that there is something infinitely higher than Deity. The great sun burning in the sky, the firm earth, all the stars of night are feeble—all, all the cosmos is feeble: it is not strong enough to utter my prayer-desire. My soul cannot reach to its full desire of prayer. I need no earth, or sea, or sun to think my thought. If my thought-part—the Psyche— were entirely separated from the body, or from the earth, I would of myself desire the same. In itself my soul desires: my existence, my soul existence, is in itself my prayer, and so long as it exists so long will it pray that I may have the fullest soul-life.

The fact of soul-experience here unveiled is just as much a fact (whether the result of evolution or of any other process) of human nature as any fact pertaining to the physical body—nay, more so, for it insists on its claim to perpetuity and continuance. Mr. Jefferies thus establishes and reinforces the fact of soul-desire and immortality—without the consciousness of these nature were but a dead, dumb show, the voices were vague or unheard; her lights are the signs of the light of soul, of desire, of heartfelt yearnings. Even in his lightest essays this idea lies implicit. The sense of beauty is the prevailing fact. Even when he deals merely with the simple aspect of hedgerow or meadow, he seeks to appeal to this sense or to awaken it. All his efforts, however trivial, have this one end in view. He is essentially a poet and a teacher. I remember a little article in *Good Words* some years ago under the title, 'The Green Corn,' which I do not recall as reprinted or embodied as a section in some of his books or larger works, though it may be; in this aspect it was one of his most characteristic bits of work. The fact is good; he seizes it, but it never wholly suffices him: he passes from the fact to its impression, to the something which it symbols and witnesses within.

'Pure colour,' he writes:

always gives the idea of fire, or rather it is perhaps as if a light shone through, as well as the colour itself. The fresh green blade of corn is like this, so pellucid, so clear and pure in its green so as to seem to shine with colour;' and then follows some exquisite passages of description, showing the loving eye intent on the object, and he proceeds; 'Force cannot make it; it must grow—an easy word to speak or write, in fact, full of potency. It is this mystery of growth and life, and beauty, and sweetness, and colour, starting forth from the clods that gives the corn its power over me. Somehow I identify myself with it; I live again as I see it. Year by year it is the same, and when I see it I feel that I have once more entered on a new life. And I think the spring, with its green corn, its violets, and hawthorn leaves, and increasing song, glows yearly dearer and more dear to this our ancient earth. So many centuries have flown! Now it is the manner with all natural things to gather as it were by smallest particles. The merest grain of sand drifts unseen into a crevice, and by-and-by another; after a while there is a heap; a century and it is a mound, and then everyone observes and comments on it. Time itself has gone on like this; the years have accumulated, first in drifts, then in heaps, and now a vast mound, to which the mountains are knolls, rises up and overshadow us. Time lies heavy on the world. The old, old earth is glad to turn from the earth and care of drilled centuries to the first sweet blades of green.

There is sunshine to-day after rain, and every lark is singing. Across the vale a broad cloud-shadow descends the hillside, is lost in the hollow, and presently, without warning, slips over the edge, coming swiftly along the green tips. The sunshine follows—the warmer for its momentary absence. Far, farx down in a grassy coomb stands a solitary corn-rick, conical-roofed, casting a lonely shadow—marked because so solitary, and beyond it on the rising slope is a brown copse. The leafless branches take a brown tint in the sunlight; on the summit above there is a furze; then more hill lines drawn against the sky. In the tops of the dark pines at the comer of the copse, could the glance sustain itself to see them. There are finches warming themselves in the sunbeams. The thick needles shelter them from the current of air, and the sky is bluer above the pines. Their hearts are full already of the happy days to come, when the most yonder by the beech, and the lichen on the fir-trunk, and the loose fibre caught in the fork of an unbending bough, shall furnish forth a sufficient mansion for their young. Another broad cloud-shadow, and another warm embrace of sun-light. All the serried ranks of the green corn bow at the word of command as the wind rushes over them.

There is largeness and freedom here. Broad as the down and free as the wind, the thought can roam high over the narrow roofs in the vale. Nature has affixed no bounds to thought. All the palings and walls and crooked fences deep down yonder are artificial. The fetters and traditions, the routine, the dull roundabout which deadens the spirit like the cold, moist earth, are the merest nothings. Here it is easy with the physical eye to look over the highest roof. The moment the eye of the mind is filled with the beauty of things natural an equal freedom and width of view come to it Step aside from the trodden foot-path of personal experience, throwing away the petty cynicism born of petty hopes disappointed. Step out upon the broad down beside the green com, and let its freshness become part of life.

The wind passes, and it bends—let the wind too pass over the spirit. From the cloud-shadow it emerges to the sunshine—let the heart come out from the shadow

of roofs to the open glow of the sky. High above, the songs of the larks fall as rain—receive it with open hands. Pure is the colour of the green flags, the slender pointed blades—let the thought be pure as the light that shines through that colour. Broad are the downs and open the aspect—gather the breadth and largeness of view. Never can that view be wide enough and large enough, there will always be room to aim higher. As the air of the hills enriches the blood, so let the presence of these beautiful things enrich the inner sense. One memory of the green com, fresh beneath the sun and wind, will lift up the heart from the clods.

Ah, the gate called Beautiful yet exists, and is open to all still, and many souls by it enter the Temple. The tendency of modern science to close this gate—though it can never stop the search for it—the vague desire after some kind of communication, some kind of poetic identification with the soul that reveals itself through the rolling year, the mysterious presence that is felt to lie behind the outbuddings of spring, the wealth and greenery of summer, with all its whisperings and music and rippling laughter, the blue of autumn, with its fruitage, its expansive horizons, its glory veiling temporary decay. The soul, if lifted up on tiptoe by even a momentary poetic enthusiasm, rebels against the dogmatism and the dicta of science, and oversteps them. The poet is powerful when he ministers here with sincerity and hope and gracious self-forgetfulness. His assurance of immortality is linked with this aspiration and the interpretation of it, and he knows it. We might almost, with assurance of our readers' suffrages, alter by one word the lines of Coleridge in 'Genevieve,' to suit our purpose:

All thoughts, all passions, all delights.
Whatever stirs this mortal frame.
All are but ministers of this.
And feed its sacred flame.

In the very necessity for the use of symbol, the poet, even when most intent on the rendering of other passions, confesses that he leans on nature, and cannot help maintaining his ministry to her.

And one may be pardoned if one suggests how significant it is that, just at the moment when science and scientific methods are perfected up to the point of claiming an autocracy of influence, such a writer as Mr. Jefferies should have arisen, and without any sense of conflict or opposition, quietly and in his own way, maintained the rights of nature and of religion—touched knowledge with wonder once more, and appealed directly to the sense of beauty and of worship.

Who loves not Knowledge ? Who shall rail
Against her beauty ? May she mix
With men and prosper ! Who shall fix
Pier pillars ? Let her work prevail.

But on her forehead sits a fire.
She sets her forward countenance,

And leaps into the future chance,
Submitting all things to desire.

Half-grown as yet, a child, and vain—
She cannot fight the fear of death;
What is she, cut from love and faith
But some wild Pallas from the brain

Of Demons, fiery-hot to burst
All barriers in her onward race
For power? Let her know her place;
She is the second, not the first.

A higher hand must make her mild,
If all be not in vain; and guide
Her footsteps, moving side by side
With Wisdom, like the younger child.

For she is earthly, of the mind;
But Wisdom heavenly, of the soul.
Oh, friend, who camest to thy goal
So early, leaving me behind,

I would the great world grew like thee,
That grewest not alone in power
And knowledge, but by year and hour
In reverence and in charity.

I preferred to give the somewhat lengthened extract above, from *The Story of My Heart*, to presenting separate sentences—mere snippets from a number of books; though from each of them sentences and paragraphs might be found in abundance to attest the truth of what has been said. Here is one, ready to hand, from *Field and Hedgerow* :

> The chief use of matter is to demonstrate to us the existence of the soul. The pebble-stone tells me I am a soul because I am not that that touches the nerves of my hand. We are distinctly two, utterly separate, and shall never come together. The little pebble and the great sun overhead—millions of miles away; yet is the great sun no more distinct and apart than this which I can touch. Dull-surfaced matter, like a polished mirror, reflects back thought to thought's self within.

Here is another:

> I want the soul of the flowers. I want the inner meaning and the understanding of the wild-flowers in the meadow. What are they? What end? What purpose? The plant knows and sees and feels; where is its mind when the petal falls? Absorbed in the universal dynamic force, or what? They make no shadow of pretence, these beautiful flowers, of being beautiful for my sake, of bearing honey for me; in short, there does not seem to be any kind of relationship between us, and yet language does not express the dumb feelings of the kind any more than the flower can speak. All these life-laboured monographs, these classifications, works of Linnaeus

and our own classic Darwin, microscope, physiology—and the flower has not given us its message yet.

Even in the *Gamekeeper at Home* and *Round about a Great Estate*—concerned as they necessarily were in a greater degree with the practical side of rural life—there are many touches of the same quality. Mr. Jefferies, in fact, could not write without betraying his affinities; he was so saturated with the ideal, the atmosphere, the imaginative impression associated with what he looked on. Capable of the clearest and most practical statements, as his letters to *the Times* about the agricultural labourers show, his native element was in the reverie and dreamy thought which close communion with nature is calculated to awaken. As this taste, like others, grows with what it feeds on, we are not surprised to learn that Mr. Jefferies' life was very solitary, though far from unsocial or ungenial in spirit But he did not care to live among crowds; his haunts were in the secluded corners that he knew so well, where he found his true friends and companions; and he eschewed temptations to those pleasures which are regarded as most congenial to cultivated minds. Bright, lively talk and the interchange of news and gossip had little or no attraction for him. In a sense he lived his life apart, caring nothing for 'society.' We can hardly make up OUR minds that this was much to be regretted. Had he mingled more with men he might have lost his hold on nature, though there is a possibility that he might have learned something more of the kind of interests which hold the great mass of men, and have thus been able to impart somewhat more of broad human interest to his stories. These were never strong in construction, and the dramatic sense, it is evident, was weak in their author. They will be read more for their careful pictures, their fine fancy and reflective wisdom, than for any skill in presenting character or of using incident effectively. His very fineness, his very devotion to his own sphere, as we have said, have limited the circle of his readers, as they limited his own sympathies in a sense, with the result that we have work almost perfect in its own kind, but that not of a kind to strike a broad surface of readers, if they strike deep where they do strike at all. This is the penalty which men of Mr. Jefferies' genius must pay for their faithfulness. They have the abiding love and gratitude of the few instead of the applause of the many; the satisfaction of having, in the best sense, edified and instructed instead of merely amusing.

But if this must be said of Mr. Jefferies' own books, this does not quite hold of Mr. Besant's Memoir, which he has published under the title we have adopted for our article. There we have all the interest of a heroic struggle, first, against the most adverse circumstances of poverty and lack of systematic education, and then against the drawbacks of a constitution never strong, and, finally, against chronic ill-health. It is, indeed, surprising how work of the kind that Mr. Jefferies did, and continued to do up almost to the day of his death, could have been done, amidst pain, poverty, racking anxiety, and threatened starvation,

such as we have hint of in Mr. Besant's book. The *Eulogy* is, in this sense, certainly the record of a heroism of patient self-denial and unfaltering courage such as we hardly have 'any parallel to in the lives of authors—sad and desolating as many' authors' lives have been; and, in contrast to many of these, our feelings of pity and regret are only intensified when we reflect that 'Mr. Jefferies' sufferings were due to no fault or vice of his. So; much might and could have been done to relieve the sorrowful reflections which must have been his in the prospect of leaving those he loved so utterly unprovided for, while he was racked with pain, and still making efforts, that should have been spared him, to lighten the prospect that lay before wife and children. No more touching story has been given to the public for many years than is to be found in the later chapters of Mr. Besant's book. And when we reflect that to so many Mr. Jefferies had opened up new and ennobling sources of pleasure had stood waiting, as it were, to point others to 'the gale Beautiful, and saw them enter, while he still stood there amid pain and sorrow, to do equal service by others yet to come, we aid moved to more than ordinary grief.'