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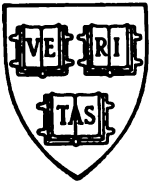
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Jefferies. 1906



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# The Faith of Richard Jefferies

BY

HENRY S. SALT

(AUTHOR OF "RICHARD JEFFERIES: HIS LIFE AND HIS IDEALS")

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THE  
FAITH OF RICHARD JEFFERIES

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In *The Story of My Heart*, published in 1883, four years before he died, Richard Jefferies made an impassioned statement of his religious creed, a record which, written at a time when the prospect of death was familiar to him, has all the gravity of a spiritual will and testament :—

I have been obliged [he said] to write these things by an irresistible impulse which has worked in me since early youth. They have not been written for the sake of argument, still less for any thought of profit—rather, indeed, the reverse. They have been forced from me by earnestness of heart, and they express my most serious convictions. For seventeen years they have been lying in my mind, continually thought of and pondered over.

This “autobiography” of Jefferies, his masterpiece alike in thought and style, is now so well known that it is unnecessary to say more than a few words concerning its conclusions, which, on their negative side, are based on the conviction that “there is no directing intelligence in human affairs,” and on the affirmative side express a profound belief in the omnipotence of human thought. In his own words—

He claims to have erased from his mind the traditions and learning of the past ages, and to stand face to face with nature and with the unknown. The general aim of the book is to free thought from every trammel, with the view of its entering upon another and larger series of ideas than those which have occupied the brain of man so many centuries.....He considers the idea of deity inferior, and believes that there is something higher. He ends, as he commences, with prayer for the fullest soul-life.

It is important to note two things about this passionate idealistic faith which inspired Jefferies' *Story*. First, it had gradually, very gradually, built itself up in place of the orthodox religious beliefs which he had held in his youth, and which are evident, as his biographer Besant tells us, in his boyish letters. "In the march of time," says Jefferies, "there fell away from my mind, as the leaves from the trees in autumn, the last traces and relics of superstitions and traditions acquired compulsorily in childhood. Always feebly adhering, they finally disappeared." It will be seen from this that he had not suddenly or thoughtlessly abandoned his earlier faith; he had outgrown and deliberately discarded it.

Secondly, it must be noted that this transition was not from belief to unbelief, but from one creed to another creed, from the orthodox religion to a natural religion which was more in accord with Jefferies' spiritual instincts. To speak of him as an "infidel," and as having held "sceptical opinions," is ridiculous, and is only a bigoted way of expressing the fact that his opinions were not the same as those of some of his critics. It was a case, not of "honest doubt," but of changed convictions, and, as he himself significantly expressed it, "with disbelief belief increased."

Nor was this maturer belief, as some have supposed, a pessimistic one, though his *Story* is full of a pathetic distrust of the hopes of the past and the present. A pessimist as regards the past, he was yet an optimist as regards the future. "Full well aware," he says, "that all has failed, yet, side by side with the sadness of that knowledge, there lives on in me an unquenchable belief that there is yet something to be found, something real, something to give each separate personality sunshine and flowers in its own existence now."

In brief, Jefferies, at the time when he wrote his

autobiography, was not a "sceptic," or "agnostic," or "unbeliever" in the sense of being a sort of spiritual derelict (*that* is only the prejudiced way of describing those who depart from orthodoxy), but a man of keen and intense conviction; and his creed, whatever its merits or its shortcomings, was essentially a faith.

It must be observed, too, that in his essay on "Hours of Spring," which was published as late as May, 1886, only fifteen months before his death, the same heretical views found renewed utterance. It is beyond dispute, therefore, that this faith of Richard Jefferies—a faith which might be summed up in the words of his later essay, "Let man, then, leave his gods, and lift up his ideal beyond them"—was the outcome and climax of a long course of thought, commenced in early manhood, and still avowedly held when the shadow of death was upon him. No profession of faith could possibly be more clear, more conscientious, and more authentic than this which he left in his writings.

When, therefore, we are told by Jefferies' orthodox admirers that his freethinking opinions were only held by him "for a time," and that he assuredly died a "believer," we may be acquitted, I think, of any heinous disrespect for the feelings and convictions of others if we claim the right to look somewhat closely into this surprising assertion, instead of accepting it without qualification. It is indeed not only our right, it is our duty to do so, in face of the emphatic statement made by Jefferies himself that the views put forward in his *Story of My Heart* expressed his "most serious convictions, continually thought of and pondered over."

The prevalence of the story of Jefferies' return to the orthodox fold rests on a passage in Sir Walter Besant's *Eulogy of Richard Jefferies*, published in 1888, in which it is stated that "at the last, during the long communings



of the night, when he lay sleepless, happy to be free, if only for a few moments, from pain, the simple old faith came back to him," and that "the man who wrote the *Story of My Heart*.....died listening with faith and love to the words contained in the Old Book." A more detailed account of this "conversion" appeared in the *Girl's Own Paper* in 1889, and was reprinted in the *Pall Mall Gazette* a couple of years later.

Now, when we remember what Jefferies' condition was in the last months of his life, it is perhaps not surprising that his fortitude of mind should have given way at the end. "Everything possible," says his biographer, "of long-continued torture, necessity of work, poverty, anxiety, and hope of recovery continually deferred, are crammed into the miserable record." "I am the veriest shadow of a man—my nerves are gone to pieces," is Jefferies' own description of his state as early as 1885. It would seem, too, from the published letters that those who were with him at this time, faithfully and truly as they ministered to his needs, made the error—for surely, whatever one's own faith may be, it is an error to press it on another person at such a moment—of urging him to accept "the words of the Old Book," and that some at least of his friends were deeply concerned to effect this result. In such cases no one would question the good intentions of those who thus perform what they conceive to be a duty; but, as I have elsewhere written, "such persons are apt to exaggerate trifles unintentionally, to see an undue significance in chance words and speeches, and to hail as the desired spiritual change that which is in reality nothing more than complete bodily collapse."

I venture to think that Jefferies' biographer would have acted more prudently if, instead of embodying these stories of the death-bed "conversion" in a somewhat

highly-coloured passage in the *Eulogy*, he had from the first brought his own judgment to bear on the precise value of such testimony. I say "from the first," because, as I shall presently show, Sir Walter Besant had reason at a later period to modify his view of the incident. As it was, he made himself personally responsible for something more than the actual *facts* of the case (which are not in dispute), and gave to that interpretation of the facts which he himself afterwards repudiated a far wider publicity than it could otherwise have obtained. It is hardly necessary to say that this account of the heretic's return to the fold was received with rapture by the religious press; but it is worth mentioning, in view of later developments, that the *Spectator* (November 17th, 1888), always to the fore on such occasions, ecstatically welcomed Besant's description of it as "a passage of rare beauty."

Five years later than Sir Walter Besant's *Eulogy* there appeared another book on the same subject, a *Study* by the present writer, in which was included a Note on the Conversion of Richard Jefferies, part of which had already been printed in a newspaper in 1891. In this Note, without saying a word that could be regarded as disrespectful to Jefferies' relatives, I ventured to point out that it is incredible that a man of his progressive intellect "should have gone back to a creed which he had once conscientiously held, but had gradually outgrown and abandoned," and I gave my reasons—the same as those indicated above—for the view which I took of the case. My conclusion was as follows:—

Herein is the simple explanation of Jefferies' alleged conversion. He was very weak—so weak that he perhaps could not but yield outward acquiescence to the affectionate importunities of those around him. So long as he retained any slight measure of health and strength; so long as he was able, even at rare intervals, to enjoy that vital communion

with Nature on which his whole being depended ; so long, in fact, as he was Richard Jefferies and not a shattered wreck—he was a freethinker. Even at the last he withdrew no syllable of his writings ; he saw no priest ; he made no acceptance of any sort of dogma. His own published statements remain and will remain the authoritative expression of his life-creed.

In thus maintaining that the incident of the “conversion” is not to be taken very seriously in a critical estimate of Jefferies’ character and opinions, I was, of course, well aware that I should be at once confronted with that “passage of rare beauty” in Sir Walter Besant’s *Eulogy*, and that comparisons would be drawn very damaging to the reputation of an obscure writer who dared to question what had been stated by Jefferies distinguished biographer ; nor had I to wait very long before I was arraigned in this manner. I was informed, for instance, by the *Spectator* that I “obtruded” my views about Jefferies far too much. “We do not know who Mr. Salt is,” it scathingly remarked, “but he can hardly be entitled to talk in this very superb fashion.” Then there was the *Salisbury Journal*, representing the native Wiltshire sentiment concerning Jefferies, which assured me, more in sorrow than anger, that my treatment of the subject was “misleading, not to say wrong-headed,” the method of one who writes “not like a seeker after the truth, but like a controversialist eager to make out his own case.” Nor have private correspondents been wanting to remind me that my remarks with reference to Jefferies’ religious views were “strangely inconsistent with the facts recorded in Besant’s *Eulogy*.”

Under this censure I had, as it happened, one unsuspected source of consolation, beyond and apart from the fact that my views appeared to be shared by most of the more sympathetic students of Jefferies with whom I was brought in touch. It was this. I had learnt that

the very writer on whose authority I was convicted of not being "a seeker after the truth" had changed his opinion about the point in dispute since he wrote the *Eulogy*, and was now practically in agreement with myself. This became known to me through a private correspondence which I had with Sir Walter (then Mr.) Besant between 1891 and 1893, and the knowledge that things had taken this turn lent a certain humour to the situation, and helped me to bear the critics' reproofs with increased equanimity. I smiled in secret as I thought of the poor old *Spectator*, and its "passage of rare beauty."

At last, after lying under this reproach for ten or twelve years, and, strange to say, feeling none the worse for it, I came to the conclusion, on the appearance of a new edition of my *Richard Jefferies: His Life and his Ideals*, in the present year, that I was justified in publishing some extracts from Sir Walter Besant's letters. They are as follows:—

To me the *Story of My Heart* has always been the most wonderful thing that Jefferies ever did, because it is wholly and entirely his own creation. He builds up a new Faith for himself, out of materials collected from Nature by himself. Now here is an important point. I stated in my *Eulogy* that he died a Christian. This was true in the sense of outward conformity. His wife read to him from the Gospel of St. Luke, and he acquiesced. But, *I have since been informed*, he was weak, too weak not to acquiesce, and his views never changed from the time that he wrote the *Story of My Heart*. For my own part it surprised me to hear that a man who had written those pages should ever return to orthodoxy, but I had no choice but to record the story as it happened, and was told to me.<sup>2</sup>

Here is another reference to the subject, written two months later, when he had read my article on "The Conversion of Richard Jefferies," and had received from me a letter in which I expressed the hope that in future

<sup>2</sup> August 29th, 1901.

editions of the *Eulogy* he would revise and amend the "passage of rare beauty" that did so charm the *Spectator* :—

Many thanks for letting me see your paper. Of course, I agree in the main with it. At the same time, I would not alter what I said, because the thing did really happen. You are free to interpret it as you please. The weakness of an exhausted and dying man deprives his last utterances on such a subject, to my own mind, of any value; at the same time, there can be no doubt of the consolation this little memory affords to his widow and others.....But you are, I am convinced, quite right. When a man gets as far as Jefferies did—when he has shed and scattered to the winds all sacerdotalism and authority—he does not go back. You neglected to notice that, if he went back at all, it was not to ask for the priest or the last sacraments of the Church. He was satisfied with the words of the great socialist and anti-sacerdotalist. Is not this a point?<sup>1</sup>

Once again, on receipt of a copy of my book on Jefferies, he repeated his concurrence with my view :—

I perfectly agree with you as to the unreality of his death-bed conversion to orthodoxy. Yet the words were spoken by him, and he did listen to the reading. It all seems to me quite simple. I have tried to show how and why in my *Life*. But orthodoxy? No!<sup>2</sup>

The matter was hardly so "simple" as Sir Walter Besant would have it. No doubt the mere facts were simple enough; but the essential question was—and is—what interpretation is to be put upon those facts? Are we to understand that Jefferies' death-bed "conversion" implied a withdrawal and recantation of his life-faith as expressed in the *Story*, or that it was evidence of nothing more than the weakness of a dying man, who at such a moment is apt to return, almost involuntarily, to the beliefs of his boyhood? The latter view is the one which Sir Walter Besant avowedly adopts in his letters;

<sup>1</sup> October 17th, 1891.

<sup>2</sup> December 22nd, 1893.

but it is equally certain that the impression given in his biography was in favour of the former view. "The simple old faith came back to him"—such is the statement plainly made in the *Eulogy*; whereas in the letter of 1891 it is held, with equal plainness, that "his views never changed from the time that he wrote the *Story of My Heart*." Here is an absolute contradiction, which I am not concerned to explain. I only refer to it in order to justify my own contention that the author of the *Eulogy* was somewhat incautious in adopting without reserve that version of the story which at the time commended itself to Jefferies' family, but was not likely, as the years went on, to commend itself so fully to the wider family of his admirers.

There are few matters so serious as not to have also their humorous side, and in this case there is decidedly a comic element in the reception accorded to Sir Walter Besant's *later* opinion of the "conversion" by those religious papers which greeted his earlier opinion so effusively. The change was like that which comes over a sunny grove of singing-birds when suddenly shadowed by some unwelcome cloud; in place of a joyful chorus there is now glum silence and oblivion. The popular novelist, in short, who had told so touchingly the return of the lamb to the fold, has suddenly become, as far as Jefferies' "conversion" is concerned, a "drug." The subject is severely let alone—is forgotten—allowed to drop.

But what of the *Spectator*, it will be asked? Surely that untiring guardian of religion and morals has not deserted its post? True, reader; and it now remains to be told what the *Spectator* said when it learnt that Sir Walter Besant, the author of the "passage of rare beauty" in which Jefferies' conversion was described, afterwards came to the conclusion that he was not converted at all.

It said this, and I make bold to draw attention to the significant brevity of the utterance :—

What Sir Walter Besant may have thought matters nothing.

That is all the value which the *Spectator* now puts on the opinion of Sir Walter Besant, once the leading authority on Richard Jefferies! *Quantum mutatus ab illo!* And then the *Spectator*, after publishing a lengthy account of Jefferies' last hours (mainly reprinted from the *Girl's Own Paper* of 1889), precipitately closed the correspondence, and refused to insert a letter in which I gave the counter-evidence, and pointed out the importance of Sir Walter Besant's change of view. Such is the freedom of discussion allowed in a case of this kind by "the leading literary organ of the day"!

But though there is a consensus of feeling in a certain portion of the Press as to the desirability of boycotting Sir Walter Besant's remarks, presumably because it is known that his name would carry weight with the public, there is by no means the same objection to creating prejudice against a comparatively unknown writer like myself, who may be vilified with impunity for asserting in public what Besant privately admitted—"the unreality of Jefferies' death-bed conversion to orthodoxy." Thus, under the title of "The Will to Disbelieve," the *Christian* (May 18th, 1905) held my treatment of the subject up to odium as "a very fair sample of the methods of modern unbelief in deliberately perverting history and biography in the interests of its prejudiced opinions"; and in the *War Cry* (May 27th) Mr. Bramwell Booth, discoursing on "Infidelity and Dishonesty," inquired whether my conduct was not "the basest form of chicanery and falsehood," with other polite references of the same sort. Both these papers, it is true, had been misled, by the *Spectator's* unfairness in giving publicity to only one side

of the discussion, into supposing that I had rashly *assumed* Jefferies' conversion to be "incredible," and that I had no arguments to offer; but it is also true that both papers subsequently ignored the arguments when offered to them, and maintained a deliberate silence as to Sir Walter Besant's support of my position. What is one to think of treatment of such a kind, coming from such a quarter? Must one not regard it as a further proof that the publication of the extracts from Besant's letters has "gone home"?

The *Spectator*, indeed, was so ill-advised as to repeat and expand its complaint of 1894, that I "obtruded" my views of Jefferies far too much, in the form of a general rule of biography, that no writer who knows his business will "air opinions of his own." The amazing absurdity of this dictum did not escape comment; for, if a biographer is not to express his own opinions, whose is he to express? Such a law would condemn as "not knowing their business" all the best biographers that literature can boast. As applied to a work which, like my book on Jefferies, was ostensibly not a biography, but a study, the *Spectator's* criticism becomes positively imbecile. It was my plain duty to discuss the question of Jefferies' alleged "conversion"; but, if any justification were needed for my doing so (which I wholly deny), it was amply supplied in the fact of that other conversion which my censors so little relish—the conversion of Sir Walter Besant to my view.

In conclusion, I can but repeat what I have already said in the *Literary Guide* (April, 1905), that feeling, as I do, a deep respect for Jefferies, I would not willingly give a moment's pain to anyone who was dear to him or who holds his memory dear. But the very respect which all lovers of nature and beauty must feel for Jefferies is itself, it seems to me, the strongest possible reason for



being entirely truthful about a writer who, above all things, honoured truth. Our obligations are not only towards the surviving relatives of a great man, but also towards the whole company of those who value him. It is not right, in common honesty, that the authority of Jefferies' biographer should continue to be quoted in support of a belief in a death-bed conversion which he himself, three years after publishing his book, had emphatically, though privately, disavowed. To hold, as I have done throughout, and as Sir Walter Besant latterly did, that Jefferies' religious convictions were practically unchanged, does not imply the smallest disrespect for the statements made by the relatives who were with him at the end. The question is not one of facts, but of how to interpret facts. I have at least proved that, if I have erred in my interpretation, I have erred in excellent company—in the company of the very writer who has been appealed to in refutation of my argument.

It is to Jefferies' *Story of My Heart*, I repeat, that his readers must look if they wish to know his conclusions respecting the deepest problems of life. There only will they find his inner autobiography, his true confession of faith; and the faith confessed by him is one of the most beautiful that has ever been clothed in words of supreme tenderness and power. Yet it is in this book that a certain pious writer, one of those who have most strenuously claimed Jefferies as a convert, can see no more than "infidel nonsense"; after which exposure of his own power of insight into the spiritual and the ideal he goes on to quote the well-worn text—all unconscious, of course, that it may carry with it a wider application than the intended one—"the fool hath said in his heart there is no God." But what of the purblind bigot who hath said in *his* heart, and also in a printed article, that there is no faith in Richard Jefferies' masterpiece—in that

marvellous prose-poem which is so alive with passionate conviction that its very words seem, as has been said of Shelley's words, to be actually transparent, and to "throb with living lustres"? Well, there is nothing for it, I suppose, but that such dull folk should continue to interpret Jefferies through the medium of the *Girl's Own Paper* and the *Spectator*, and should confine their study of him to the safer pages of (say) his *Amateur Poacher* or his *Gamekeeper at Home*. But in his *Story* lives the real record of his Faith.

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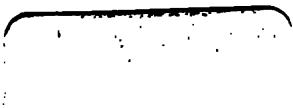
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