AMARYLLIS AT THE FAIR

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Amaryllis at the Fair by Richard Jefferies

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BY

RICHARD JEFFERIES

AUTHOR OF
"THE GAMEKEEPER AT HOME," "BEVIS: THE STORY OF A BOY," "AFTER LONDON," ETC.

"Our day is but a finger: bring large cups"
ALCÆUS

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1906

Miss Elaine Schuyler Crane - 23 Oct. 1916

Dedicated

TO

CHARLES PRESTWICH SCOTT.

INTRODUCTION.[1]

"THE book is not a novel" is a phrase often in the mouth of critics, who on second thoughts might, perhaps, add with less emphasis, "It does not conform to the common type of novel." Fortified, however, with that sense of rectitude that dictates conformity to our neighbours and a safe acquiescence in the mysterious movements of public taste, the critics have exclaimed with touching unanimity—"What a pity Jefferies tried to write novels! Why didn't he stick to essays in natural history!"

What a pity Jefferies should have given us "Amaryllis at the Fair," and "After London"!—this opinion has been propagated with such fervency that it seems almost a pity to disturb it by inquiring into the nature of these his achievements. Certainly the critics, and their critical echoes, are united. "He wrote some later novels of indifferent merit," says a critic in "Chambers' Encyclopædia." "Has anyone ever been able to write with free and genuine

[1] Reprinted in part from "The Academy" of April 4th, 1903.

appreciation of even the later novels?" asks or echoes a lady, Miss Grace Toplis, writing on Jefferies. "In brief, he was an essayist and not a novelist at all," says Mr. Henry Salt. "It is therefore certain that his importance for posterity will dwindle, if it has not already dwindled, to that given by a bundle of descriptive selections. But these will occupy a foremost place on their particular shelf, the shelf at the head of which stands Gilbert White and Gray," says Mr. George Saintsbury. "He was a reporter of genius, and he never got beyond reporting. Mr. Besant has the vitalising imagination which Jefferies lacked," says Mr. Henley in his review of Walter Besant's "Eulogy of Richard Jefferies"; and again, "They are not novels as he (Walter Besant) admits, they are a series of pictures. . . . That is the way he takes Jefferies at Jefferies' worst." Yes, it is very touching this unanimity, and it is therefore a pleasure for this critic to say that in his judgement "Amaryllis at the Fair" is one of the very few later-day novels of English country life that are worth putting on one's shelf, and that to make room for it he would turn out certain highly-praised novels by Hardy which do not ring quite true, novels which the critics and the public, again with touching unanimity, have voted to be of high rank. But what is a novel? the reader may ask. A novel, says the learned Charles Annandale, is "a fictitious prose narrative, involving some plot of greater or less intricacy, and professing to give a picture of real life, generally exhibiting the passions and sentiments, in a state of

great activity, and especially the passion of love." Well, "Amaryllis at the Fair" is a fictitious prose narrative professing to give a picture of real life, and involving a plot of little intricacy. Certainly it exhibits the passions and sentiments in a state of great activity. But Mr. Henry Salt, whose little book on Jefferies is the best yet published, further remarks: "Jefferies was quite unable to give any vivid dramatic life to his stories . . . his instinct was that of the naturalist who observes and moralizes rather than that of the novelist who penetrates and interprets; and consequently his rustic characters, though strongly and clearly drawn, do not live, as, for example, those of Thomas Hardy live. . . . Men and animals are alike mere figures in his landscapes."

So far the critics. Jefferies being justly held to be "no ordinary novelist," it is inferred by most that something is wrong with "Amaryllis the Fair," and the book has been passed over in silence. But we do not judge every novel by the same test. We do not judge "Tristram Shandy," for example, by its intricate plot, or by its "vivid drama," we judge it simply as an artistic revelation of human life and by its humorous insight into human character. And judged by the same simple test "Amaryllis at the Fair," we contend, is a living picture of life, a creative work of imagination of a high order. Iden, the unsuccessful farmer who "built for all time, and not for the circumstances of the hour," is a masterly piece of character drawing. But Iden is a personal

portrait, the reader may object, Well, what about Uncle Toby? From what void did he spring? Iden, to our mind, is almost as masterly a conception, as broadly human a figure as Uncle Toby. And Mrs. Iden, where will you find this type of nervous, irritable wife, full of spiteful disillusioned love for her dilatory husband better painted than by Jefferies? But Mrs. Iden is a type, not an individual, the reader may say. Excellent reader! and what about the Widow Wadman? She is no less and no more of an individual than is Mrs. Iden. It was a great feat of Sterne to create so cunningly the atmosphere of the Shandy household, but Jefferies has accomplished an artistic feat also in drawing the relations of the Idens, father, mother, and daughter. How true, how unerringly true to human nature is this picture of the Iden household; how delicately felt and rendered to a hair is his picture of the father's sluggish, masculine will, pricked ineffectually by the waspish tongue of feminine criticism. Further, we not only have the family's idiosyncrasies, their habits, mental atmosphere, and domestic story brought before us in a hundred pages, easily and instinctively by the hand of the artist, but we have the whole book steeped in the breath of English spring, the restless ache of spring that thrills through the nerves, and stirs the sluggish winter blood; we have the spring feeling breaking from the March heavens and the March earth in copse, meadow, and ploughland, as it has scarcely been rendered before by English novelist. The description of Amaryllis running out into the

March wind to call her father from his potato planting to see the daffodil; the picture of Iden pretending to sleep in his chair that he may watch the mice; the description of the girl Amaryllis watching the crowd of plain, ugly men of the countryside flocking along the road to the fair; the description of Amadis the invalid, in the old farm kitchen among the stalwart country folk—all these pictures and a dozen others in the book are painted with a masterly hand. Pictures! the critical reader may complain. Yes, pictures of living men and women. What does it matter whether a revelation of human life is conveyed to us by pictures or by action so long as it is conveyed? Mr. Saintsbury classes Jefferies with Gray, presumably because both writers have written of the English landscape. With Gray! Jefferies in his work as a naturalist and observer of wild life may be classed merely for convenience with Gilbert White. But this classification only applies to one half of Jefferies' books. By his "Wild Life in a Southern County" he stands beside Gilbert White; by his "Story of My Heart" he stands by himself, a little apart from the poets, and by "Amaryllis at the Fair" he stands among the half-dozen country writers of the century whose work is racy of the English soil and of rural English human nature. We will name three of these writers, Barnes, Cobbett, Waugh, and our attentive readers can name the other three.

To come back to "Amaryllis at the Fair," why is it so masterly, or, further, wherein is it so masterly, the curious reader may inquire? "Is it not full of