

**WORLD'S END: A
STORY IN THREE
BOOKS, VOL. I**

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World's end: A Story in Three Books, Vol. I by Richard Jefferies

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RICHARD JEFFERIES

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WORLD'S END.

BOOK I.

FACTS.

CHAPTER I.

IT is not generally known that the mighty city of Stirlingham owes its existence to a water-rat. Stirlingham has a population of half a million, and is the workshop of the earth. It is a proud city, and its press-men have traced its origin back into the dim vista of the past, far before Alfred the Great's time, somewhere in the days of those monarchs who came from Troy, and whose deeds Holinshed so minutely chronicles.

But this is all trash and nonsense, and is a cunning device of the able editors aforesaid, who confound—for their own purposes—the city proper with the tiny hamlet of Wolf's Glow. This little village or cluster of houses, which now forms a part, and the dirtiest part, of the city, can indeed be traced through Hundred Rolls, Domesday Book, and Saxon Charters, almost down to the time of the Romans. But Stirmingham, the prosperous and proud Stirmingham, which thinks that the world could not exist without its watches and guns, its plated goods, its monster factories and mills, which sends cargoes to Timbuctoo, and supplies Java and Malabar with idols—this vast place, whose nickname is a by-word for cheating, for fair outward show and no real solidity, owes its existence to a water-rat. This is a fact. And it happened in this way.

Once upon a time there was a wide expanse of utterly useless land, flat as this

sheet of paper, without a trace of subsoil or any kind of earth in which so much as a blade of grass could grow. It was utterly dry and sterile—not a tree nor a shrub to shelter a cow or a horse, and all men avoided it as a waste and desolate place. It was the very abomination of desolation, and no one would have been surprised to have seen satyrs and other strange creatures diverting themselves thereon. Around one edge of this plain there flowed a brook, so small that one could hardly call it by that name. A dainty lady from Belgravia could have easily stepped across it without soiling the sole of her boot.

At one spot beside this brook there grew a willow tree. This tree was a picture in itself, and would have made the fortune of any artist who would have condescended to make a loving study of it. The trunk had been of very large size, but now resembled a canoe standing upon end, for nearly one half had decayed, and the crumbling wood

had disappeared, leaving a hollow stem. The stem was itself dead and decaying, except one thin streak of green, up which the golden sap of life still ran, and invigorated the ancient head of the tree to send forth yellow buds and pointed leaves. Up one side of the hollow trunk an ivy creeper had climbed to the top, and was fast hanging festoons from bough to bough.

In the vast mass of decaying wood at the top or head of the tree a briar had taken root—its seed no doubt dropped by some thrush—and its prickly shoots hung over and drooped to the ground in luxuriance of growth. The hardy fern had also found a lodging here, and its dull green leaves, which they say grow most by moonlight, formed a species of crown to the dying tree.

This willow was the paradise of such birds as live upon insects, for they abounded in the decaying wood; and at the top a wild pigeon had built its nest. As years went by, the willow bent more and more over the

brook. The water washing the soil out from between its roots formed a hollow space, where a slight eddy scooped out a deeper hole, in which the vermilion - throated stickleback or minnow disported and watched the mouth of its nest. This eddy also weakened the tree by undermining it at its foundation. The ivy grew thicker till it formed a perfect bush upon the top, and this in the winter afforded a hold for the wind to shake the tree by. The wind would have passed harmlessly through the slender branches, but the ivy, even in winter, the season of storms, left something against which it could rage with effect. Finally came the water-rat.

If Stirringham objects to owe its origin to a water-rat, it may at least congratulate itself upon the fact that it was a good old English rat—none of your modern parvenu, grey Hanoverian rascals. It was, in fact, before the Norwegian rat, which had been imported in the holds of vessels, had