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Defoe Abbot Melville Montaigne Cooper Emerson Hugo
Stoker Wilde Christie Maupassant Haggard Chesterton Molière Eliot Grimm
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Goethe Hawthorne Smith Kafka
Cotton Dostoyevsky Kipling Doyle Willis
Baum Henry Flaubert Nietzsche Turgenev Balzac
Leslie Dumas Stockton Vatsyayana Crane
Burroughs Verne
Curtis Tocqueville Gogol Busch
Homer Tolstoy Whitman Twain
Darwin Zola Lawrence Dickens Plato
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Round About a Great Estate

Richard Jefferies

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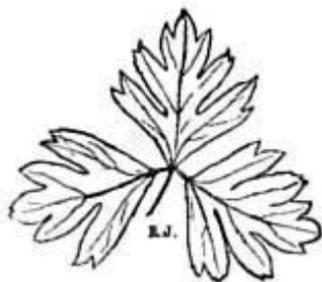
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ROUND ABOUT A GREAT ESTATE

By

RICHARD JEFFERIES



PREFACE.

There is an old story which in respect of a modern application may bear re-telling. Once upon a time in a lonely 'coombe-bottom' of the Downs, where there was neither church, chapel, nor public building of any kind, there lived a cottage-girl who had never seen anything of civilisation. A friend, however, having gone out to service in a market-town some few miles distant, she one day walked in to see her, and was shown the wonders of the place, the railway, the post-office, the hotels, and so forth. In the evening the friend accompanied her a short way on the return journey, and as they went out of the town, they passed the church. Looking suddenly up at the tower, the visitor exclaimed, 'Lard-a-mussy! you've got another moon here. Youn have got figures all round un!' In her excitement, and prepared to see marvels, she had mistaken the large dial of the church clock for a moon of a different kind to the one which shone upon her native home. This old tale, familiar to country folk as an illustration of simplicity, has to-day a wider meaning. Until recent years the population dwelling in villages and hamlets, and even in little rural towns, saw indeed the sun by day and the moon by night, and learned the traditions and customs of their forefathers, such as had been handed down for generations. But now a new illumination has fallen upon these far-away places. The cottager is no longer ignorant, and his child is well grounded in rudimentary education, reads and writes with facility, and is not without knowledge of the higher sort. Thus there is now another moon with the figures of education all round it. In this book some notes have been made of the former state of things before it passes away entirely. But I would not have it therefore thought that I wish it to continue or return. My sympathies and hopes are with the light of the future, only I should like it to come from nature. The clock should be read by the sunshine, not the sun timed by the clock. The latter is indeed impossible, for though all the clocks in the world should declare the hour of dawn to be midnight, the sun will presently rise just the same.

Richard Jefferies.

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ROUND ABOUT A GREAT ESTATE.

CHAPTER I.

OKEBOURNE CHACE. FELLING TREES.

The great house at Okebourne Chace stands in the midst of the park, and from the southern windows no dwellings are visible. Near at hand the trees appear isolated, but further away insensibly gather together, and above them rises the distant Down crowned with four tumuli. Among several private paths which traverse the park there is one that, passing through a belt of ash wood, enters the meadows. Sometimes following the hedges and sometimes crossing the angles, this path finally ends, after about a mile, in the garden surrounding a large thatched farmhouse. In the maps of the parish it has probably another name, but from being so long inhabited by the Lucketts it is always spoken of as Lucketts' Place.

The house itself and ninety acres of grass land have been their freehold for many generations; in fact, although there is no actual deed of entail, the property is as strictly preserved in the family and descends from heir to heir as regularly as the great estate and mansion adjacent. Old Hilary Lockett—though familiarly called 'old,' he is physically in the prime of life—is probably about the most independent man in the county. Yet he is on terms of more than goodwill with the great house, and rents one of the largest farms on the estate, somewhere between six and seven hundred acres. He has the right of shooting, and in the course of years privilege after privilege has been granted, till Hilary is now as free of the warren as the owner of the charter himself. If you should be visiting Okebourne Chace, and any question should arise whether of horses, dog, or gun, you are sure to be referred to Hilary. Hilary knows all about it: he is the authority thereabout on all matters concerning game. Is it proposed to plant fresh covers? Hilary's opinion is asked. Is it proposed to thin out some of the older trees; what does Hilary say?

It is a fact that people really believe no part of a partridge is ever taken away after being set before him. Neither bones nor sinews remain: so fond is he of the brown bird. Having eaten the breast, and the juicy leg and the delicate wing, he next proceeds to suck the bones; for game to be thoroughly enjoyed should be eaten like a mince-pie, in the fingers. There is always one bone with a sweeter flavour than the rest, just at the joint or fracture: it varies in every

bird according to the chance of the cooking, but, having discovered it, put it aside for further and more strict attention. Presently he begins to grind up the bones in his strong teeth, commencing with the smallest. His teeth are not now so powerful as when in younger days he used to lift a sack of wheat with them, or the full milking-bucket up to the level of the copper in the dairy. Still they gradually reduce the slender skeleton. The feat is not so difficult if the bird has been well hung.

He has the right to shoot, and need take no precautions. But, in fact, a farmer, whether he has liberty or not, can usually amuse himself occasionally in that way. If his labourer sees him quietly slipping up beside the hedge with his double-barrel towards the cove in the corner where a pheasant has been heard several times lately, the labourer watches him with delight, and says nothing. Should anyone in authority ask where that gun went off, the labourer 'thinks it wur th' birdkippur up in th' Dree Vurlong, you.' Presently the pheasant hangs in the farmer's cellar, his long tail sweeping the top of the XXX cask; and the 'servant-wench,' who is in and out all day, also says nothing. Nor can anything exceed the care with which she disposes of the feathers when she picks the bird. There is a thorough sympathy between master and man so far. Hilary himself, with all that great estate to sport over, cannot at times refrain from stepping across the boundary. His landlord once, it is whispered, was out with Hilary shooting, and they became so absent-minded while discussing some interesting subject as to wander several fields beyond the property before they discovered their mistake.

At Lucketts' Place the favourite partridge always comes up for supper: a pleasant meal that nowadays can rarely be had out of a farmhouse. Then the bright light from the burning log outshines the lamp, and glances rosy on the silver tankard standing under a glass shade on a bracket against the wall. Hilary's father won it near half a century since in some heats that were run on the Downs on the old racecourse, before it was ploughed up. For the wicked turnip is responsible for the destruction of old England; far more so than the steam-engine.

Waste lands all glorious with golden blossoming furze, with purple foxglove, or curious orchis hiding in stray corners; wild moor-like lands, beautiful with heaths and honey-bottle; grand stretches of sloping downs where the hares hid in the grass, and where all the horses in the kingdom might gallop at their will; these have been overthrown with the plough because of the turnip. As the root crops came in, the rage began for thinning the hedges and grubbing the double mounds and killing the young timber, besides putting in the drains and driving away the wild-ducks. The wicked turnip put diamonds on the fingers of the farmer's wife, and presently raised his rent. But now some of the land is getting 'turnip-sick,' the roots come stringy and small and useless, so that many let it 'vall down.'

After the last crop it is left alone, the couch grows, the docks spread out from the hedges, every species of weed starts up, till by-and-by the ploughed land becomes green and is called pasture. This is a process going on at the present moment, and to which owners of land should see without delay. Hilary has been looked on somewhat coldly by other tenants for openly calling the lord of the manor's attention to it. He sturdily maintains that arable land if laid down for pasture should be laid down properly—a thing that requires labour and expenditure just the same as other farming operations. So the silver tankard, won when 'cups' were not so common as now, is a memorial of the old times before the plough turned up the sweet turf of the racecourse.

Hilary does not bet beyond the modest 'fiver' which a man would be thought unsociable if he did not risk on the horse that carries the country's colours. But he is very 'thick' with the racing-people on the Downs, and supplies the stable with oats, which is, I believe, not an unprofitable commission. The historical anecdote of the Roman emperor who fed his horse on gilded oats reads a little strange when we first come across it in youth. But many a race-horse owner has found reason since to doubt if it be so wonderful, as his own stud—to judge by the cost—must live on golden fodder. Now, before I found this out about the stable, it happened one spring day that I met Hilary in the fields, and listened to a long tirade which he delivered against 'wuts.'

The wheat was then showing a beautiful flag, the despised oats were coming out in jag, and the black knots on the delicate barley straw were beginning to be topped with the hail. The flag is the long narrow green leaf of the wheat; in jag means the spray-like drooping awn of the oat; and the hail is the beard of the barley, which when it is white and brittle in harvest-time gets down the back of the neck, irritating the skin of those who work among it. According to Hilary, oats do not flourish on rich land; and when he was young (and everything was then done right) a farmer who grew oats was looked upon with contempt, as they were thought only fit for the poorest soil, and a crop that therefore denoted poverty. But nowadays, thundered Hilary in scorn, all farmers grow oats, and, indeed, anything in preference to wheat.

Afterwards, at the Derby that year, methought I saw Hilary as I passed the sign of the 'Carrion Crow:' the dead bird dangles from the top of a tall pole stuck in the sward beside a booth. I lost him in the crowd then. But later on in autumn, while rambling round the Chace, there came on a 'skit' of rain, and I made for one of his barns for shelter. There was Hilary in the barn with his men, as busy as they could well be, winnowing oats. It seemed to me that especial care was being taken, and on asking questions, to which the men silently replied with a grin, Hilary presently blurted out that the dust had to be carefully removed, because the grain was for the racing-stable. The dainty creatures up there must have food free from dust, which makes them too thirsty. The hay supplied, for the same reason, had to be shaken before being used. No oats would do under 40 lb. the bushel, and the heavier the better.

Luckett was a man whom every one knew to be 'square;' but, if the talk of the country-side is to be believed, the farmers who have much to do with the stables do not always come off successful. They sometimes become too sharp, and fancy themselves cleverer than a class of men who, if their stature be not great, are probably the keenest of wit. The farmer who obliges them is invariably repaid with lucrative 'tips;' but if he betrays those 'tips' may possibly find his information in turn untrustworthy, and have to sell by auction, and depart to Texas. Luckett avoids such pitfalls by the simple policy of 'squareness,' which is, perhaps, the wisest of all. When the 'skit' blew past he took his gun from the corner and stepped over

the hatch, and came down the path with me, grumbling that all the grain, even where the crop looked well, had threshed out so light.

Farming had gone utterly to the dogs of late seasons; he thought he should give up the land he rented, and live on the ninety acres freehold. In short, to hear him talk, you would think that he was conferring a very great favour upon his landlord in consenting to hold that six or seven hundred acres at a rent which has not been altered these fifty years at least. But the owner was a very good fellow, and as Hilary said, 'There it is, you see.' My private opinion is that, despite the late bad seasons, Hilary has long been doing remarkably well; and as for his landlord, that he would stand by him shoulder to shoulder if defence were needed.

Much as I admired the timber about the Chace, I could not help sometimes wishing to have a chop at it. The pleasure of felling trees is never lost. In youth, in manhood—so long as the arm can wield the axe—the enjoyment is equally keen. As the heavy tool passes over the shoulder the impetus of the swinging motion lightens the weight, and something like a thrill passes through the sinews. Why is it so pleasant to strike? What secret instinct is it that makes the delivery of a blow with axe or hammer so exhilarating? The wilder frenzy of the sword—the fury of striking with the keen blade, which overtakes men even now when they come hand to hand, and which was once the life of battle—seems to arise from the same feeling. Then, as the sharp edge of the axe cuts deep through the bark into the wood, there is a second moment of gratification. The next blow sends a chip spinning aside; and by-the-bye never stand at the side of a woodman, for a chip may score your cheek like a slash with a knife. But the shortness of man's days will not allow him to cut down many trees. In imagination I sometimes seem to hear the sounds of the axes that have been ringing in the forests of America for a hundred years, and envy the joy of the lumbermen as the tall pines toppled to the fall. Of our English trees there is none so pleasant to chop as the lime; the steel enters into it so easily.

In the enclosed portion of the park at Okebourne the boughs of the trees descended and swept the sward. Nothing but sheep being permitted to graze there, the trees grew in their natural form, the lower limbs drooping downwards to the ground. Hedgerow timber

is usually 'stripped' up at intervals, and the bushes, too, interfere with the expansion of the branches; while the boughs of trees standing in the open fields are nibbled off by cattle. But in that part of the park no cattle had fed in the memory of man; so that the lower limbs, drooping by their own weight, came arching to the turf. Each tree thus made a perfect bower.

The old woodmen who worked in the Chace told me it used to be said that elm ought only to be thrown on two days of the year—*i.e.* the 31st of December and the 1st of January. The meaning was that it should be cut in the very 'dead of the year,' when the sap had retired, so that the timber might last longer. The old folk took the greatest trouble to get their timber well seasoned, which is the reason why the woodwork in old houses has endured so well. Passing under some elms one June evening, I heard a humming overhead, and found it was caused by a number of bees and humble-bees busy in the upper branches at a great height from the ground. They were probably after the honey-dew. Buttercups do not flourish under trees; in early summer, where elms or oaks stand in the mowing-grass, there is often a circle around almost bare of them and merely green, while the rest of the meadow glistens with the burnished gold of that beautiful flower.

The oak is properly regarded as a slow-growing tree, but under certain circumstances a sapling will shoot up quickly to a wonderful height. When the woodmen cut down a fir plantation in the Chace there was a young oak among it that overtopped the firs, and yet its diameter was so small that it looked no larger than a pole; and the supporting boughs of the firs being now removed it could not uphold itself, but bent so much from the perpendicular as to appear incapable of withstanding a gale. The bark of the oak, when stripped and stacked, requires fine weather to dry it, much the same as hay, so that a wet season like 1879 is very unfavourable.

In the open glades of the Chace there were noble clumps of beeches, and if you walked quietly under them in the still October days you might hear a slight but clear and distinct sound above you. This was caused by the teeth of a squirrel nibbling the beech-nuts, and every now and then down came pieces of husk rustling through the coloured leaves. Sometimes a nut would fall which he

had dropped; and yet, with the nibbling sound to guide the eye, it was not always easy to distinguish the little creature. But his tail presently betrayed him among the foliage, far out on a bough where the nuts grew. The husks, if undisturbed, remain on all the winter and till the tree is in full green leaf again; the young nuts are formed about midsummer.

The black poplars are so much like the aspen as to be easily mistaken, especially as their leaves rustle in the same way. But the true aspen has a smooth bark, while that of the black poplar is scored or rough. Woodmen always call the aspen the 'asp,' dropping the termination. In the spring the young foliage of the black poplar has a yellow tint. When they cut down the alder poles by the water and peeled them, the sap under the bark as it dried turned as red as if stained. The paths in spring were strewn with the sheaths of the young leaves and buds pushing forth; showers of such brown sheaths came off the hawthorn with every breeze. These, with the catkins, form the first fall from tree and bush. The second is the flower, as the May, and the horse-chestnut bloom, whose petals cover the ground. The third fall is that of the leaf, and the fourth the fruit.

On the Scotch fir the young green cones are formed about the beginning of June, and then the catkin adjacent to the cone is completely covered with quantities of pale yellow farina. If handled, it covers the fingers as though they had been dipped in sulphur-flour; shake the branch and it flies off, a little cloud of powdery particles. The scaly bark takes a ruddy tinge, when the sunshine falls upon it, and would then, I think, be worthy the attention of an artist as much as the birch bark, whose peculiar mingling of silvery white, orange, and brown, painters so often endeavour to represent on canvas. There is something in the Scotch fir, crowned at the top like a palm with its dark foliage, which, in a way I cannot express or indeed analyse, suggests to my mind the far-away old world of the geologists.

In the boughs of the birch a mass of twigs sometimes grows so close and entangled together as to appear like a large nest from a distance when the leaves are off. Even as early as December the tomtits attack the buds, then in their sheaths, of the birch, clinging

to the very extremities of the slender boughs. I once found a young birch growing on the ledge of a brick bridge, outside the parapet, and some forty or fifty feet from the ground. It was about four feet high, quite a sapling, and apparently flourishing, though where the roots could find soil it was difficult to discover.

The ash tree is slowly disappearing from many places, and owners of hedgerow and copse would do well to plant ash, which affords a most useful wood. Ash poles are plentiful, but ash timber gets scarcer year by year; for as the present trees are felled there are no young ones rising up to take their place. Consequently ash is becoming dearer, as the fishermen find; for many of the pleasure yachts which they let out in summer are planked with ash, which answers well for boats which are often high and dry on the beach, though it would not do if always in the water. These beach-boats have an oak frame, oak stem and stern-post, beech keel, and are planked with ash. When they require repairing, the owners find ash planking scarce and dear.

Trees may be said to change their garments thrice in the season. In the spring the woods at Okebourne were of the tenderest green, which, as the summer drew on, lost its delicacy of hue. Then came the second or 'midsummer shoot,' brightening them with fresh leaves and fresh green. The second shoot of the oak is reddish: there was one oak in the Chace which after midsummer thus became ruddy from the highest to the lowest branch; others did not show the change nearly so much. Lastly came the brown and yellow autumn tints.