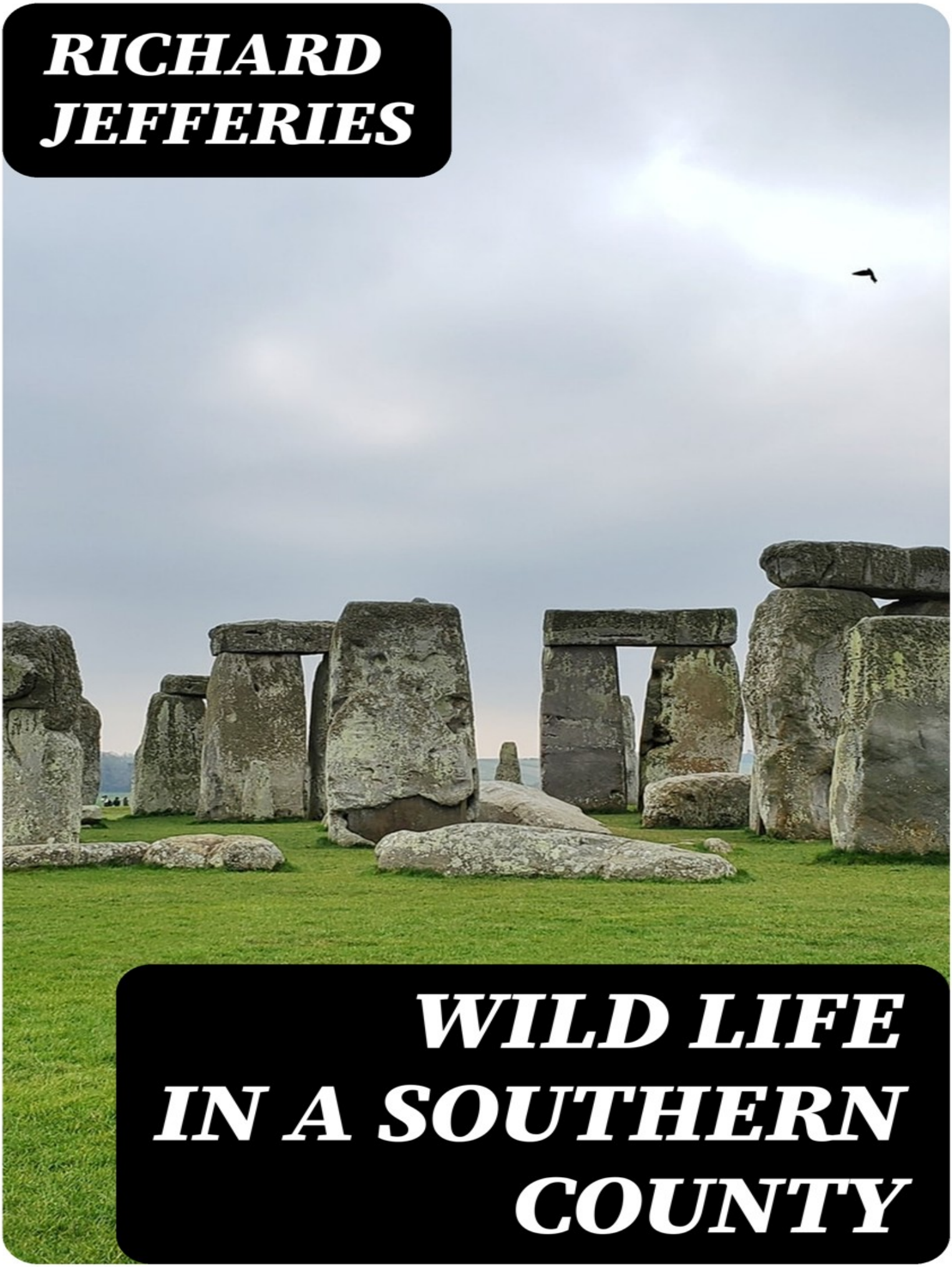
RICHARD JEFFERIES



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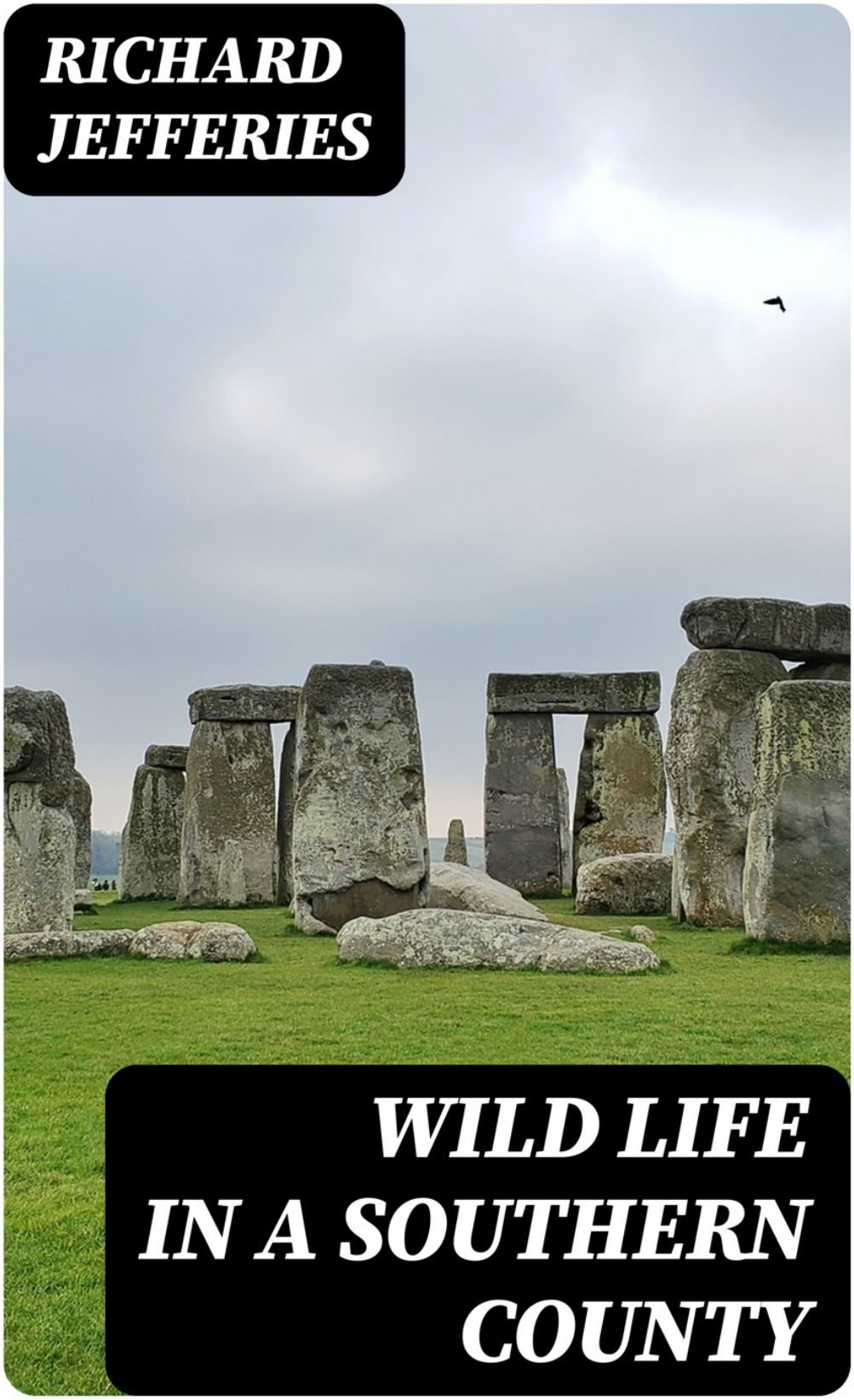

# WILD LIFE IN A SOUTHERN COUNTY

**Richard Jefferies**

# Wild Life in a Southern County

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# Preface.

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There is a frontier line to civilisation in this country yet, and not far outside its great centres we come quickly even now on the borderland of nature. Modern progress, except where it has exterminated them, has scarcely touched the habits of bird or animal; so almost up to the very houses of the metropolis the nightingale yearly returns to her former haunts. If we go a few hours' journey only, and then step just beyond the highway—where the steam ploughing engine has left the mark of its wide wheels on the dust—and glance into the hedgerow, the copse, or stream, there are nature's children as unrestrained in their wild, free life as they were in the veritable backwoods of primitive England. So, too, in some degree with the tillers of the soil: old manners and customs linger, and there seems an echo of the past in the breadth of their pronunciation.

But a difficulty confronts the explorer who would carry away a note of what he has seen, because nature is not cut and dried to hand, nor easily classified, each subject shading gradually into another. In studying the ways, for instance, of so common a bird as the starling it cannot be separated from the farmhouse in the thatch of which it often breeds, the rooks with whom it associates, or the friendly sheep upon whose backs it sometimes rides. Since the subjects are so closely connected, it is best, perhaps, to take the places they prefer for the convenience of division, and group them as far as possible in the districts they usually frequent.

The following chapters have, therefore, been so arranged as to correspond in some degree with the contour of the country. Commencing at the highest spot, an ancient entrenchment on the Downs has been chosen as the starting-place from whence to explore the uplands. Beneath the hill a spring breaks forth, and, tracing its course downwards, there next come the village and the hamlet. Still farther the streamlet becomes a broad brook, flowing through meadows in the midst of which stands a solitary farmhouse. The house itself, the garden and orchard, are visited by various birds and animals. In the fields immediately around—in the great hedges and the copse—are numerous others, and an expedition is made to the forest. Returning to the farm again as a centre, the rookery remains to be examined, and the ways and habits of the inhabitants of the hedges. Finally come the fish and wild-fowl of the brook and lake;—finishing in the Vale.

R.J.

# Chapter One.

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## The Downs—The Entrenchment—Ways of Larks—Hares—A Combat—Happiness of Animals—Ants—A Long Journey.

The most commanding down is crowned with the grassy mound and trenches of an ancient earthwork, from whence there is a noble view of hill and plain. The inner slope of the green fosse is inclined at an angle pleasant to recline on, with the head just below the edge, in the summer sunshine. A faint sound as of a sea heard in a dream—a sibilant ‘sish, sish,’—passes along outside, dying away and coming again as a fresh wave of the wind rushes through the bennets and the dry grass. There is the happy hum of bees—who love the hills—as they speed by laden with their golden harvest, a drowsy warmth, and the delicious odour of wild thyme. Behind the fosse sinks, and the rampart rises high and steep—two butterflies are wheeling in uncertain flight over the summit. It is only necessary to raise the head a little way, and the cool breeze refreshes the cheek—cool at this height while the plains beneath glow under the heat.

Presently a small swift shadow passes across—it is that of a hawk flying low over the hill. He skirts it for some distance, and then shoots out into the air, comes back half-way, and hangs over the fallow below, where there is a small rick. His wings vibrate, striking the air downwards, and only slightly backwards, the tail depressed counteracting

the inclination to glide forwards for awhile. In a few moments he slips, as it were, from his balance, but brings, himself up again in a few yards, turning a curve so as to still hover above the rick. If he espies a tempting morsel he drops like a stone, and alights on a spot almost exactly below him—a power which few birds seem to possess. Most of them approach the ground gradually, the plane of their flight sloping slowly to the earth, and the angle decreasing every moment till it becomes parallel, when they have only to drop their legs, shut their wings, and, as it were, stand upright in the air to find themselves safe on the sward. By that time their original impetus has diminished, and they feel no shock from the cessation of motion. The hawk, on the contrary, seems to descend nearly in a perpendicular line.

The lark does the same, and often from a still greater height descending so swiftly that by comparison with other birds it looks as if she must be dashed to pieces; but when within a few yards of the ground, the wings are outstretched, and she glides along some distance before alighting. This latter motion makes it difficult to tell where a lark actually does alight. So, too, with snipe: they appear to drop in a corner of the brook, and you feel positive that a certain bunch of rushes is the precise place; but before you get there the snipe is up again under your feet, ten or fifteen yards closer than you supposed, having shot along hidden by the banks, just above the water, out of sight.

Sometimes, after soaring to an unusual elevation, the lark comes down, as it were, in one or two stages: after dropping say fifty feet, the wings are employed, and she

shoots forward horizontally some way, which checks the velocity. Repeating this twice or more, she reaches the ground safely. In rising up to sing she often traces a sweeping spiral in the air at first, going round once or twice; after which, seeming to settle on the line she means to ascend, she goes up almost perpendicularly in a series of leaps, as it were—pausing a moment to gather impetus, and then shooting upwards till a mere speck in the sky. When ten or twelve larks are singing at once, all within a narrow radius—a thing that may be often witnessed from these downs in the spring—the charm of their vivacious notes is greater than when one solitary bird alone discourses sweet music which is lost in the blue dome overhead.

At that time they seem to feed only a few minutes consecutively, and then, as if seized with an uncontrollable impulse, rush up into the air to deliver a brief song, descend, and repeat the process for hours. They have a way, too, of rising but six or eight yards above the earth, spreading the wings out and keeping them nearly still, floating slowly forward, all the while uttering one sweet note softly. The sward by the roadside appears to have a special attraction for them; they constantly come over from the arable fields, alight there, and presently return. In the early spring, when love-making is in full progress, the cornfields where the young green blades are just showing, become the scene of the most amusing rivalry. Far as the eye can see across the ground it seems alive with larks—chasing each other to and fro, round and round, with excited calls, flying close to the surface, continually alighting, and springing up again. A gleam of sunshine and a warm south wind brings

forth these merry antics. So like in general hue is the lark to the lumps of brown earth that even at a few paces it is difficult to distinguish her. Some seem always to remain in the meadows; but the majority frequent the arable land, and especially the cornfields on the slopes of the downs, where they may be found in such numbers as rival or perhaps exceed those of any other bird.

At first sight starlings seem more numerous; but this arises from their habit of gathering together in such vast flocks, blackening the earth where they alight. But you may walk a whole day across the downs and still find larks everywhere; so that though scattered abroad they probably equal or exceed the starlings, who show so much more. They are by no means timid, being but little disturbed here: you can get near enough to watch every motion, and if they rise it is only to sing. They never seem to know precisely where they are going to alight—as if, indeed, they were nervously particular and must find a clod that pleases them, picking and choosing with the greatest nicety.

Many other birds exhibit a similar trait: instead of perching on the first branch, they hesitate, and daintily decline the bough not quite to their fancy. Blackbirds will cruise along the whole length of a hedge before finding a bush to their liking; they look in several times ere finally deciding. Wood-pigeons will make straight for a tree, and slacken speed and show every sign of choosing it, and suddenly, without the slightest cause apparently, go half a mile farther. The partridge which you could vow had dropped just over the hedge has done no such thing; just

before touching the ground she has turned at right angles and gone fifty yards down it.

The impression left after watching the motions of birds is that of extreme mobility—a life of perpetual impulse checked only by fear. With one or two exceptions, they do not appear to have the least idea of saving labour by clearing one spot of ground of food before flying farther: they just hastily snatch a morsel and off again; or, in a tree, peer anxiously into every crack and crevice on one bough, and away to another tree a hundred yards distant, leaving fifty boughs behind without examination. Starlings literally race over the earth where they are feeding—jealous of each other lest one should be first, and so they leave a tract all around not so much as looked at. Then, having run a little way, they rise and fly to another part of the field. Each starling seems full of envy and emulation—eager to outstrip his fellow in the race for titbits; and so they all miss much of what they might otherwise find. Their life is so gregarious that it resembles that of men in cities: watching one another with feverish anxiety—pushing and bustling. Larks are much calmer, and always appear placid even in their restlessness, and do not jostle their neighbours.

See—the hawk, after going nearly out of sight, has swept round, and passes again at no great distance; this is a common habit of his kind, to beat round in wide circles. As the breeze strikes him aslant his course he seems to fly for a short time partly on one side, like a skater sliding on the outer edge.

There is a rough grass growing within the enclosure of the earthwork and here and there upon the hills, which the

sheep will not eat, so that it remains in matted masses. In this the hares make their forms; and they must, somehow, have a trick of creeping into their places, since many of the grass-blades often arch over, and if they sprang into the form heedlessly this could not be the case, as their size and weight would crush it down. When startled by a passer-by the hare—unless there is a dog—goes off in a leisurely fashion, doubtless feeling quite safe in the length of his legs, and after getting a hundred yards or so sits upon his haunches and watches the intruder. Their ‘runs’ or paths are rather broader than a rabbit’s, and straighter—the rabbit does not ramble so far from home; he has his paths across the meadow to the hedge on the other side, but no farther. The hare’s track may be traced for a great distance crossing the hills; but while the roads are longer they are much fewer in number. The rabbit makes a perfect network of ‘runs,’ and seems always to feed from a regular path; the hare apparently feeds anywhere, without much reference to the ‘runs,’ which he uses simply to get from one place to another in the most direct line, and also, it may be suspected, as a promenade on which to meet the ladies of his acquaintance by moonlight.

It is amusing to see two of these animals drumming each other; they stand on their hind legs (which are very long) like a dog taught to beg, and strike with the fore-pads as if boxing, only the blow is delivered downwards instead of from the shoulder. The clatter of their pads may be heard much farther than would be supposed. Round and round they go like a couple waltzing; now one giving ground and then the other, the fore-legs striking all the while with

marvellous rapidity. Presently they pause—it is to recover breath only; and, ‘time’ being up, to work they go again with renewed energy, dancing round and round, till the observer cannot choose but smile. This trick they will continue till you are weary of watching.

There are holes on the hills, not above a yard deep and entering the slope horizontally, which are said to be used by the hares more in a playful mood than from any real desire of shelter. Yet they dislike wet; most wild animals do. Birds, on the contrary, find it answer their purpose, grubs and worms abounding at such times. Though the hare is of a wandering disposition he usually returns to the same form, and, if undisturbed, will use it every day for a length of time, at night perhaps being miles away. If hard pressed by the dogs he will leap a broad brook in fine style, but he usually prefers to cross by a bridge. In the evening, as it grows dusk, if you watch from the elevation of the entrenchment, you may see these creatures steal out into the level cornfield below, first one, then two, presently five or six—looming much larger than they really are in the dusk, and seeming to appear upon the scene suddenly. They have a trick of stealing along close to the low mounds which divide arable fields, so that they are unobserved till they turn out into the open ground.

It is not easy to distinguish a hare when crouching in a ploughed field, his colour harmonises so well with the clods; so that an unpractised eye generally fails to note him. An old hand with the gun cannot pass a field without involuntarily glancing along the furrows made by the plough to see if their regular grooves are broken by anything hiding

therein. The ploughmen usually take special care with their work near public roads, so that the furrows end on to the base of the highway shall be mathematically straight. They often succeed so well that the furrows look as if traced with a ruler, and exhibit curious effects of vanishing perspective. Along the furrow, just as it is turned, there runs a shimmering light as the eye traces it up. The ploughshare, heavy and drawn with great force, smooths the earth as it cleaves it, giving it for a time a ‘face’ as it were, the moisture on which reflects the light. If you watch the farmers driving to market, you will see that they glance up the furrows to note the workmanship and look for game; you may tell from a distance if they espy a hare by the check of the rein and the extended hand pointing.

The partridges, too, cower as they hear the noise of wheels or footsteps, but their brown backs, rounded as they stoop, do not deceive the eye that knows full well the irregular shape taken by lumps of earth. Both hares and rabbits may be watched with ease from an elevation, and if you remain quiet will rarely discover your presence while you are above them. They keep a sharp look-out all round, but never think of glancing upwards, unless, of course, some unusual noise attracts attention.

Looking away from the brow of the hill here over the rampart, see, yonder in the narrow hollow a flock is feeding: you can tell even so far off that it is feeding, because the sheep are scattered about, dotted hither and thither over the surface. It is their habit the moment they are driven to run together. Farther away, slowly travelling up a distant

down, another flock, packed close, rises towards the ridge, like a thick white mist stealthily ascending the slope.

Just outside the trench, almost within reach, there lies a small white something, half hidden by the grass. It is the skull of a hare, bleached by the winds and the dew and the heat of the summer sun. The skeleton has disappeared, nothing but the bony casing of the head remains, with its dim suggestiveness of life, polished and smooth from the friction of the elements. Holding it in the hand the shadow falls into and darkens the cavities once filled by the wistful eyes which whilom glanced down from the summit here upon the sweet clover fields beneath. Beasts of prey and wandering dogs have carried away the bones of the skeleton, dropping them far apart; the crows and the ants doubtless had their share of the carcass. Perhaps a wound caused by shot that did not immediately check his speed, or wasting disease depriving him of strength to obtain food, brought him low; mayhap an insidious enemy crept on him in his form.

The joy in life of these animals—indeed, of almost all animals and birds in freedom—is very great. You may see it in every motion: in the lissom bound of the hare, the playful leap of the rabbit, the song that the lark and the finch *must* sing; the soft, loving coo of the dove in the hawthorn; the blackbird ruffling out his feathers on a rail. The sense of living—the consciousness of seeing and feeling—is manifestly intense in them all, and is in itself an exquisite pleasure. Their appetites seem ever fresh: they rush to the banquet spread by Mother Earth with a gusto that Lucullus never knew in the midst of his artistic gluttony; they drink

from the stream with dainty sips as though it were richest wine. Watch the birds in the spring; the pairs dance from bough to bough, and know not how to express their wild happiness. The hare rejoices in the swiftness of his limbs: his nostrils sniff the air, his strong sinews spurn the earth; like an arrow from a bow he shoots up the steep hill that we must clamber slowly, halting half-way to breathe. On outspread wings the swallow floats above, then slants downwards with a rapid swoop, and with the impetus of the motion rises easily. Therefore it is that this skull here, lying so light in the palm of the hand, with the bright sunshine falling on it, and a shadowy darkness in the vacant orbits of the eyes, fills us with sadness. ‘As leaves on leaves, so men on men decay;’ how much more so with these creatures whose generations are so short.

If we look closely into the grass here on the slope of the fosse it is animated by a busy throng of insects rushing in hot haste to and fro. They must find it a labour and a toil to make progress through the green forest of grass-blade and moss and heaths and thick thyme bunches, over-topping them as cedars, but cedars all strewn in confusion, crossing and interlacing, with no path through the jungle. Watch this ant travelling patiently onward, and mark the distance traversed by the milestone of a tall bennet.

First up on a dry white stalk of grass lingering from last autumn; then down on to a thistle leaf, round it, and along a bent blade leading beneath into the intricacy and darkness at the roots. Presently, after a prolonged absence, up again on a dead fibre of grass, brown and withered, torn up by the sheep but not eaten: this lies like a bridge across a yawning

chasm—the mark or indentation left by the hoof of a horse scrambling up when the turf was wet and soft. Half-way across the weight of the ant overbalances it, slight as that weight is, and down it goes into the cavity: undaunted, after getting clear, the insect begins to climb up the precipitous edge and again plunges into the wood. Coming to a broader leaf, which promises an open space, it is found to be hairy, and therefore impassable except with infinite trouble; so the wayfarer endeavours to pass underneath, but has in the end to work round it. Then a breadth of moss intervenes, which is worse than the vast prickly hedges with which savage kings fence their cities to the explorer, who can get no certain footing on it, but falls through and climbs up again twenty times, and burrows a way somehow in the shady depths below.

Next, a bunch of thyme crosses the path: and here for a lengthened period the ant goes utterly out of sight, lost in the interior, slowly groping round about within, and finally emerging in a glade where your walking-stick, carelessly thrown on the ground, bends back the grass and so throws open a lane to the traveller. In a straight line the distance thus painfully traversed may be ten or twelve inches; certainly in getting over it the insect has covered not less than three times as much, probably more—now up, now down, backwards and sideways, searching out a passage.

As this process goes on from morn till night through the long summer’s day, some faint idea may be obtained of the journeys thus performed, against difficulties and obstacles before which the task of crossing Africa from sea to sea is a trifle. How, for instance, does the ant manage to keep a

tolerably correct course, steering straight despite the turns and labyrinthine involutions of the path? It is never possible to see far in front—half the time not twice its own length; often and often it is necessary to retrace the trail and strike out a fresh one—a step that would confuse most persons even in an English wood with which they were unacquainted.

Yet by some power of observation, perhaps superior in this respect to the abilities of greater creatures, the tiny thing guides its footsteps without faltering down yonder to the nest in the hollow on the bank of the ploughed field. I say by observation, and the exercise of faculties resembling those of the mind, because I have many times tried the supposed unerring instinct of the ant, and found it fail: therefore it must possess a power of correcting error which is the prerogative of reason. Ants cannot, under certain conditions, distinguish their own special haunts. Across a garden path I frequented there was the track of innumerable ants; their ceaseless journeyings had worn a visible path leading from the border on one side to the border on the other, where was a tiny hole, into which they each disappeared in turn. Happily, the garden was neglected, otherwise the besom of the gardener would have swept away all traces of the highway they had made. Watching the stream of life pouring swiftly along the track, it seemed to me that, like men walking hurriedly in well-known streets, they took no note of marks or bearings, but followed each other unhesitatingly in the groove.

When street-pavements are torn up, the human stream disperses and flows out on either side till it discovers by

experience the most convenient makeshift passage. What would be the result if this Watling-street of the ants were interrupted? With a fragment of wood I rubbed out three inches of the path worn in the shallow film of soil deposited over the old gravel, smoothing that much down level. Instantly the crowd came to a stop. The foremost ant halted at the edge where the groove now terminated, turned round, and had an excited conversation with the next by means of their antennae; a third came up, a fourth and fifth—a crowd collected, in fact. Now, there was no real obstruction—nothing to prevent them from rushing across to the spot where the path recommenced. Why, then, did they pause? Why, presently, begin to explore, right and left, darting to one side and then to the other examining? Was it not because an old and acquired habit was suddenly uprooted? Surely infallible instinct could have carried them across the space of three inches without any trouble of investigation?

In a few seconds one of the exploring parties, making a curve, hit the other end of the path, and the news was quickly spread, for the rest followed almost immediately. Placing a small pebble across the track on another occasion caused almost the same amount of interference with the traffic. Near the hole into which the ants plunged under the border, and on the edge of the bank, so to say, the path they had worn was not visible—the ground was hard and did not take impression; and there, losing the guidance of the groove, they often made mistakes. Instead of hitting the right hole, many of them missed it and entered other holes left by boring worms, and after a short time reappeared to

search again, till, finding the cavern, they hastily plunged into it. This was particularly the case when a solitary insect came along. Therefore it would seem that the ant works its way tentatively, and, observing where it fails, tries another place and succeeds.

# Chapter Two.

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## A Drought—Ancient Garrison of the Entrenchment—Traditions of Forest—Curious Ponds—A Mirage.

Once now and then in the cycle of the years there comes a summer which to the hills is almost like a fever to the blood, wasting and drying up with its heat the green things upon which animal life depends, so that drought and famine go hand in hand. The days go by and grow to weeks, the weeks lengthen to months, and still no rain. The sun pours down his burning rays, which become hotter as the season advances; the sky is blue and beautiful over the hills—beautiful, but pitiless to the bleating flocks beneath. The breeze comes up from the south, bringing with it white clouds sailing at an immense height, with openings between like azure lakes or aerial Mediterraneans landlocked by banks of vapour.

These, if you watch them from the rampart, slowly dissolve; fragments break away from the mass as the edges of the polar glaciers slip off the ice-cliff into the sea, only these are noiseless. The fragment detached grows visibly thinner and more translucent, its margin stretching out in an uneven fringe: the process is almost exactly like the unravelling of a spotless garment, the threads wavering and twisting as they are carried along by the current, diminishing till they fade and are lost in the ocean of blue. This breaking of the clouds is commonly seen in weather that promises to be fine. From the brow here, you may note

a solitary cloud just risen above the horizon; it floats slowly towards us; presently it divides into several parts; these, again, fall away in jagged, irregular pieces like flecks of foam. By the time it has reached the zenith these flecks have lengthened out, and shortly afterwards the cloud has entirely melted and is gone. The delicate hue, the contrast of the fleecy white with the deepest azure, the ever-changing form, the light shining through the gauzy texture, the gentle dreamy motion, lend these clouds an exquisite beauty.

After a while the faint breeze increases, but changes in character; it blows steadily, and the ‘sish sish’ of the bennets as it rushes through them becomes incessant. A sense of oppression weighs on the chest—in the midst of the wind, on the verge of the hill, you sigh for a breath of air. This is not air: it is simply heat in motion. It is like the simoom of the desert—producing a feeling of intense weariness. Previously the distant ridges of the downs were shaded by a dim haze hovering over them, toning the rolling curves and softening the bolder bluffs. Now they become distinct; each line is drawn clearly and stands out; the definition is like that which occurs before rain, only without the illusion of nearness.

But the hot wind blows and the rain does not come: the sky is open and free from clouds, less blue perhaps, but harder in tint. The nights are bright and clear and warm; you may sit here on the turf till midnight and find no dew, and still feel the languid, enervating influence of the hot blast. This goes in time, and is succeeded by heavy morning mists hanging like a cloak over the hills and filling up the hollows.

They roll away as the day advances, and there is the sun bright as ever in the midst of the cloudless sky. The shepherds say the mists carry away the rain; certainly it does not come.

Every now and then promising signs exhibit themselves. A black bank of vapour receives the setting sun, and in the east huge mountainous clouds with beetling precipices and caverns, in which surely the thunder lurks, swell and roll upwards in the hush of the evening. The farmer unrolls his canvas over the new-made hayrick, which is not yet thatched, thinking that a torrent will descend in the night; but no, the morrow is the same. It is a peculiarity of our usually changeable climate that when once the weather has become thoroughly settled either to dry or wet, no signs of alteration are of any value, true as they may be at other times.

So the heat continues and the drought increases. The ‘land-springs’ breaking out by the sides of the fields have long since disappeared; the true springs run feebly as the stores of water in the interior of the earth gradually grow less. Great cracks open in the clay of the meadows down below in the vale—rifts, wide and deep, into which you may thrust your walking-stick to the handle. Up here on the hills the turf grows hard and inelastic; it loses that ‘springy’ feel under the foot which makes it so pleasant to walk upon. The grass becomes dull in tint and touches like wire—all the sap dried from it, and nothing but fibre left. Beneath the chalk is moistureless, and nothing can grow on it. The byroads and paths made with the chalk or ‘rubble’ glare in the sunlight, and the flints scattered so thickly about the ploughed fields

seem to radiate heat. All things that should look green are brown and dusty; even the leaves on the elms seem dusty. The wheat only flourishes, tall and strong—deep tinted yellow here, a ruddy, golden bronze yonder, with ears full and heavy, rich and glorious to gaze upon. Insects multiply and replenish the earth after their fashion exceedingly; the spiders are busy as may be, not only those that watch from their webs lying in wait, but those that chase their prey through the grass as dogs do game.

But under the beautiful sky and the glorious sun there rises up a pitiful cry the livelong day: it is the quavering bleat of the sheep as their strength slowly ebbs out of them for the lack of food. Green crops and roots fail, the aftermath in the meadows beneath will not grow, week after week ‘keep’ becomes scarcer and more expensive, and there is, in fact, a famine. Of all animals a starved sheep is the most wretched to contemplate, not only because of the angularity of outline, and the cavernous depressions where fat and flesh should be, but because the associations of many generations have given the sheep a peculiar claim upon humanity. They hang entirely on human help. They watch for the shepherd as though he were their father; and when he comes he can do no good, so that there is no more painful spectacle than a fold during a drought upon the hills.

Once upon a time, passing on foot for a distance of some twenty-five miles across these hills and grassy uplands, I could not help comparing the scene to what travellers tell us of desert lands and foreign famines. The whole of that long summer’s day, as I hastened southwards, eager for the beach and the scent of the sea, I passed flocks of dying

sheep: in the hollows by the way their skeletons were here and there to be seen, the gaunt ribs protruding upwards in the horrible manner that the ribs of dead creatures do. Crowds of flies buzzed in the air. Upon the hurdles perched the crow, bold with over-feasting, and hardly turning to look at me, waiting there till the next lamb should fall and the ‘spirit of the beast go downwards.’ Happy England, that experiences these things so seldom, and even then so locally that barely one in ten hears of or sees them!

The cattle of course suffer too; all day long files of water-carts go down into the hollows where the springs burst forth, and at such times half the work of the farm consists in fetching the precious liquid perhaps a mile or more. Even in ordinary summers there is often a difficulty of this kind; and there are some farmhouses whose water for household uses has to be brought fully half a mile. Of recent years more wells have been sunk, but there are still too few for the purpose. The effect of water in determining the settlements of human beings is clearly shown here. You may walk mile after mile on the ridges and pass nothing but a shed; the houses are in the hollows, the ‘coombes’ or ‘bottoms,’ as they are called, where the springs run. The villages on the downs are generally on a ‘bourne,’ or winter watercourse.

In summer it is a broad winding trench with low green banks, along whose bed you may stroll dry-shod, with the yellow corn on either hand reaching above your head. A few sedges here and there, and that peculiar whitened appearance left when water has passed over vegetation, betoken that once there was a stream. It is like the watercourses and rivers of the East, which are the roads of

the traveller till the storm comes, and, lo! in the morning is a rushing flood. Near the village some water is to be seen in the pond which has been deepened out to hold it, and which is, too, kept up here by a spring.

In winter the bourne often has the appearance of a broad brook: you may observe where the current has arranged the small flints washed in from the fields by the rain. As the villages are on the lesser ‘bournes,’ so the towns are placed on the banks of the rivers these fall into. There may generally be found a row of villages and hamlets on the last slope of the downs, where the hills sink finally away into the plain and vale, so that if anyone went along the edge of the hills he would naturally think the district well populated. But if instead of following the edge he penetrated into the interior he would find the precise contrary to be the case. Just at the edge there is water, the ‘heads’ of the innumerable streams that make the vale so verdant. In the days when wealth consisted chiefly in flocks and herds, men would naturally settle where there were ‘water-brooks.’

When at last the drought ceases, and the rain does come, it often pours with tropical vehemence; so that the soil of the fields upon the slopes is carried away into the brooks, and the furrows are filled up level with the sand washed out from the clods, the lighter particles of earth floating suspended in the stream, the heavier sand remaining behind. Then, sometimes, as the slow labourer lingers over the ground, with eyes ever bent downwards, he spies a faint glitter, and picks up an antique coin in his horny fingers: coins are generally found after a shower, on the same principle that the gold-seekers wash away the

auriferous soil in the ‘cradle,’ and lay bare the yellow atoms. Such coins, too, are sometimes of the same precious metal, ancient and rude. Sometimes the edge of the hoe clinks against a coin, thus at last discovered after so many centuries; yet which for years must have lain so near the surface as to have been turned over and over again by the ploughshare, though unnoticed.

The magnitude of the space enclosed by the earthwork, the height of the rampart and depth of the fosse, show that it was originally intended to be occupied by a large force. With modern artillery, the mitrailleuse, and above all the breech-loading rifle, a comparatively small number of men could hold a commanding position like this: a steep ascent on three sides, and on the fourth a narrow level ridge, easily swept by their fire. But when this entrenchment was thrown up—the chalky earth and flints probably carried up in osier-baskets, for they do not seem to have had wheelbarrows in those times—every single yard of rampart required its spear or threatening arrow, so as to present an unbroken rank along the summit. If not; the enemy approaching to close quarters and attacking several places at once would find gaps through which they might pour into the camp. It seems, therefore, evident that these works once sheltered an army; and, looking at their massive character, it is difficult to resist the conclusion that they were not temporary trenches merely, but were permanently garrisoned.

There is another alternative; they may have been a place of refuge for the surrounding population in the nameless wars waged between rival kings. In that case they would,

when resorted to, contain a still larger number of persons; women and children and aged men would be included, and to these must be added cattle and sheep. Now, reflecting upon these considerations, and recollecting the remarks previously made upon the lack of water on these hills, the very curious question arises, How did such an army, or such a refugee population with cattle and horses, supply themselves with sufficient water for drinking purposes? The closest examination of the camp itself fails to yield even a suggestion for an answer.

There is not the slightest trace of a well, and it may fairly be questioned whether a well would have been practicable at that date. For this bold brow itself stands high enough; but then, in addition, it is piled on an elevated plateau or table-land, beneath which again is the level at which springs break out. The wells of the district all commence on this table-land or plain. A depression, too, is chosen for the purpose, and their depth is about ninety feet on the average: many are much deeper. But when to this depth the task of digging right down through the hill piled up above the plain is added, the difficulty becomes extreme.

On walking round the entrenchment at the bottom of the fosse, and keeping an eye upon the herbage—the best of all guides—one spot may be noticed where there grows a little of that ‘rowetty’ grass seen in the damp furrows of the meadows. But there is no sign whatever of a basin or excavation to catch and contain this slight moisture—slight indeed, for the earth is as hard and impenetrable here as elsewhere, and this faint moisture is evidently caused by the rainfall draining down the slope of the rampart. Looking next

outside the works for the source of such a supply, a spring will be found in a deep coombe, or bottom, about 800 yards—say, half a mile—from the nearest part of the fosse, reckoning in a straight line. Then, in bringing up water from this spring, which may be supposed to have been done in skins, a double ascent had to be made: first up on to the level plateau, here very narrow, next up the steep down itself. Those only who have had experience of the immense labour of watering cattle on the hills can estimate the work this must have been. An idea is obtained of the value of an elevated position in early warfare, when men for the sake of its advantage were found willing to submit to such toil.

That, however, is not all—foraging parties fetching water must have been liable to be cut off from the main body; there were no cannon then to cover a sortie, and if the enemy were in sufficient force and took possession of the spring, they could compel an engagement, or drive the besieged to surrender rather than endure the tortures of thirst. So that a study of these English hills—widely different as are the conditions of time and place—may throw a strong light upon many an incident of ancient history. There are no traces remaining of any covered way or hollow dyke leading down the slope in the direction of the spring; but some such traces do seem to exhibit themselves in two places—at the rear of the earthwork along the ridge of the hill, and down the steepest and shortest ascent. The first does not come up to the entrenchment, being separated by a wide interval; the latter does, and may possibly have been used as a covered way, though now much obliterated and too shallow for the purpose. The rampart itself is in almost perfect

preservation; in one spot the soil has slightly slipped, but form and outline are everywhere distinct.

In endeavouring, however, for a moment to glance back into the unwritten past, and to reconstruct the conditions of some fourteen or fifteen centuries since, it must not be forgotten that the downs may then have presented a different appearance. There is a tradition lingering still that they were in the olden times almost covered with wood. I have tried to fix this tradition—to focus it and give it definite shape; but like a mist visible from a distance yet unseen when you are actually in it, it refuses to be grasped. Still, there it is. The old people say that the king—they have no idea which king—could follow the chase for some forty miles across these hills, through a succession of copses, woods, and straggling covers, forming a great forest. To look now from the top of the rampart over the rolling hills, the idea is difficult to admit at first. They are apparently bare, huge billowy swells of green, with wide hollows, cultivated on the lower levels, but open and unenclosed for mile after mile, almost without hedges, and seemingly treeless save for the gnarled and stunted hawthorns—apparently a bare expanse; but more minute acquaintance leads to different conclusions.

Here, to begin with, on the same ridge as the earthwork and not a quarter of a mile distant, is a small clump of wind-harassed trees, growing on the very edge. They are firs and beech, and, though so thoroughly exposed to furious gales, have attained a fair height even in that thin soil. Beech and fir, then, can grow here. Away yonder on another ridge is another such a clump, indistinct from the distance; though