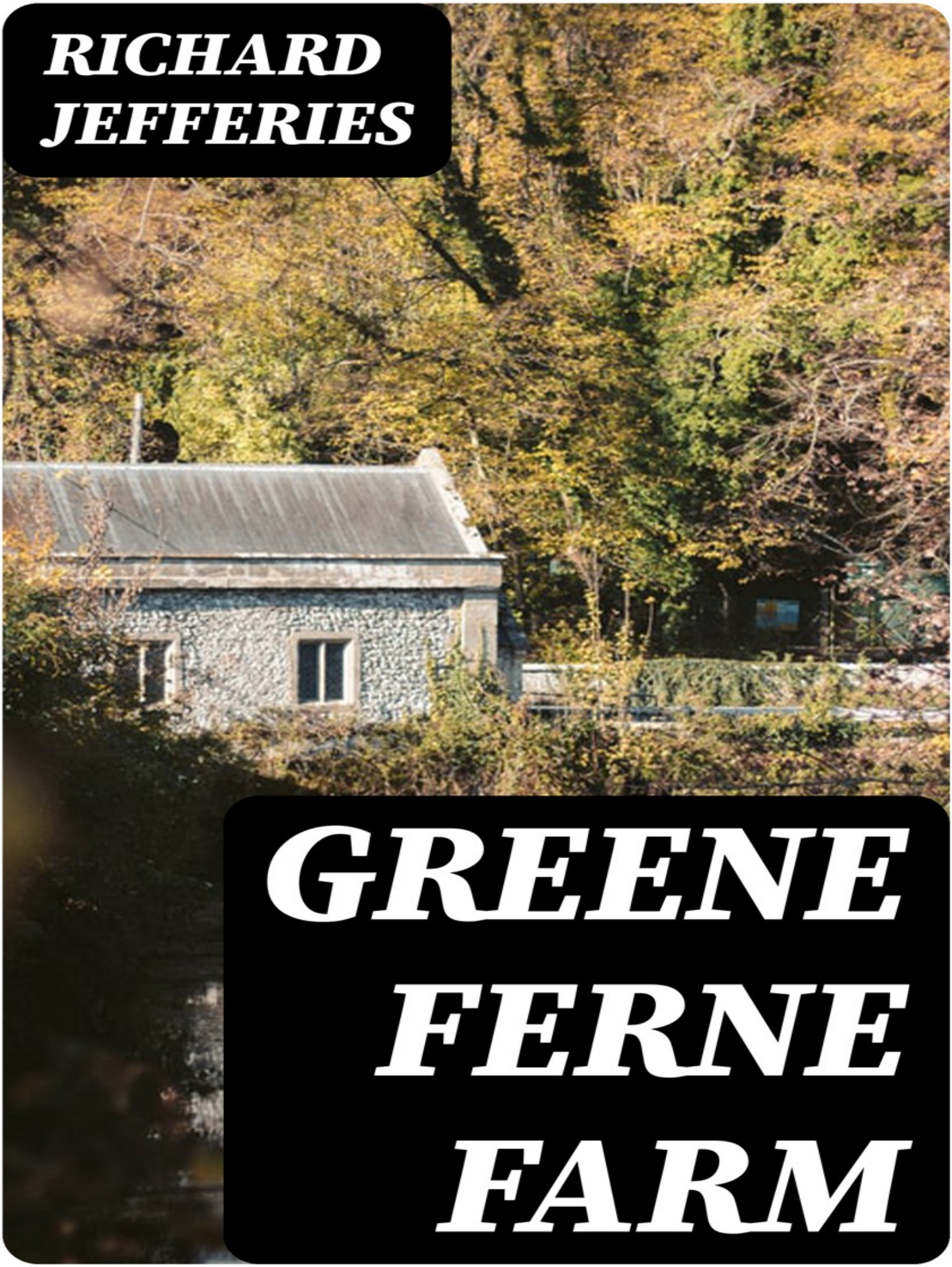
RICHARD JEFFERIES



# GREENE FERNE FARM

**Richard Jefferies**

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# "Greene Ferne Farm"

# Chapter One.

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## “Up to Church.”

“Fine growing marning, you.”

“Ay, casualty weather, though.”

Ding—ding—dill! Dill—ding—dill! This last was the cracked bell of the village church ringing “to service.” The speakers were two farmers, who, after exchanging greeting, leant against the churchyard wall, and looked over, as they had done every fine-weather Sunday this thirty years. So regular was this pressure, that the moss which covered the coping-stones elsewhere was absent from the spot where they placed their arms. On the other side of the wall, and on somewhat lower ground, was a pigsty, beyond that a cow-yard, then a barn and some ricks. “Casualty,” used in connection with weather, means uncertain. Mr Hedges, the taller of the two men, stooped a good deal; he wore a suit of black, topped, however, by a billycock. Mr Ruck, very big and burly, was shaped something like one of his own mangolds turned upside-down: that is to say, as the glance ran over his figure, beginning at the head, it had to take in a swelling outline as it proceeded lower. He was clad in a snowy-white smock-frock, breeches and gaiters, and glossy beaver hat.

This costume had a hieroglyphic meaning. The showy smock-frock intimated that he had risen from lowly estate, and was proud of the fact. The breeches and gaiters gave him an air of respectable antiquity in itself equivalent to a certain standing. Finally the beaver hat—which everybody in

the parish knew cost a guinea, and nothing less—bespoke the thousand pounds at the bank to which he so frequently alluded.

Dill—ding—ding! Ding—dill—dill!

The sweet spring air breathed softly; the warm sunshine fell on the old grey church, whose shadow slowly receded from the tombstones and low grassy mounds. The rounded ridge of the Downs rose high to the south—so near that the fleecy clouds sailing up were not visible till they slid suddenly into view over the summit. Tiny toy-like sheep, reduced in size by the distance were dotted here and there on the broad slope. Over the corn hard by, the larks sprang up and sang at so great a height that the motion of their wings could not be distinguished. The earth exhaled a perfume, there was music in the sky, a caress in the breeze. Far down in the vale a sheet of water glistened; beyond that the forest of trees and hedges became indistinct, and assumed a faint blue tint, extending like the sea, till heaven and earth mingled at the hazy horizon.

Humph—humph! The pigs were thrusting their noses into a heap of rubbish piled up against the wall, and covered with docks and nettles. Mr Hedges leant a little farther over the coping, and with the end of his stick rubbed the back of the fattest, producing divers grunts of satisfaction. This operation seemed to give equal pleasure to the man and the animal.

“Thirteen score,” said Ruck sententiously, referring to the weight of the said pig.

“Mebbe a bit more, you,”—two farmers could by no possibility agree on the weight of an animal. “Folk never

used to think nothing of a peg till a’ were nigh on twenty score. But this generation be nice in bacon, and likes a wafer rasher as shrivels up dry without a lick of grease.”

“It be a spectacle to see the chaps in the Lunnon eating-houses pick over their plates,” said Ruck. “Such a waste of good vittels!”

“There’ll be a judgment on it some day.” The click of the double wicket-gates—double, to keep other people’s sheep out and the rector’s sheep in—now began to sound more frequently, as the congregation gathered by twos and threes, coming up the various footpaths that led across the fields. Very few entered the church—most hanging about and forming little groups as their acquaintances came up. The boys stole away from their gossiping parents, and got together where a projecting buttress and several high square tombs formed a recess and hid their proceedings. A broad sunken slab just there was level with the turf; the grass grew over at the edges. They had scraped away the moss that covered it; the inscription had long since disappeared, except the figure 7, a remnant of the date. Something like the chink of coppers on stone might have been heard now and then, when there was a lull in their chatter.

Dill—dill!

“Squire Thorpe got visitors, yent a’?” asked Hedges, perfectly well aware of the fact, but desirous of learning something else, and getting at it sideways, as country folk will.

“Aw; that tall fellow, Geoffrey Newton, and Val Browne, as have set up the training-stables.”

“Warn he’ll want some hay?” This was a leading question, and Hedges rubbed away at the pig to appear innocently unconcerned.

“I sold his trainer eighty ton o’ clauver,” said Ruck. “A’ be a gentleman, every inch of un.”

“Stiffish price, you?”

“Five pound ten.”

Whew!

“Ay, ay; but it be five mile to cart it; and a nation bad road.”

“What’s that long chap doing at Squire’s? He ’as been to Australia.”

“A’ be goin’ to larn farming.”

“Larn farming!” Intense contempt.

“A’ be down to Greene Ferne a’ studying pretty often,” said Ruck, with a wink and a broad grin.

“Wimmen,” said Hedges, giving an extra hard scrape at the pig, who responded Humph—humph!

“Wimmen,” repeated Ruck still more emphatically.

“There be worse thengs about,” said a voice behind. It was the clerk, who, having put the rector’s surplice ready, had slipped out for a minute into the churchyard to communicate a piece of news. He was a little shrivelled old fellow.

“Nash was allus a gay man,” said Ruck.

“So was his father afore un,” added Hedges. “It runs in the family.”

“Summut in the blood, summut in the blood,” said Nash, not to appear to value the hereditary propensity too highly.

“Did ee never notice that shart men be a’most sure to get on with th’ wimmen? I got summut to tell ee.”

“What be it?” from both listeners at once.

If the Athenians were eager for something new, those that dwell in the fields are ten times more so.

“You knows Mr Valentine Browne as built the new stables?”

“Sartainly.”

“He have took my cottage for the trout-fishing.”

“Aw! You calls un Hollyocks, doan’t ee?” said Ruck.

“A’ bean’t very far from Greene Ferne, be a’?” asked Hedges.

“Wimmen,” said the clerk meaningly. “’Pend upon it, it be the wimmen!”

“Lor, here um comes!” said Ruck.

Two young men walked quickly round the tower, coming from the other side, down the gravel path past the group, and opening the wicket-gate went out into the field. Nash bowed and scraped, Ruck lifted his beaver, but neither seemed to observe these attentions.

“It be the wimmen, and no mistake,” said Ruck. “Thaay be gone to meet um. The Ferne folk be moast sure to come up thuck path this sunny day, ’stead of driving.”

“Marnin’, shepherd,” said the clerk to a labouring man who had just entered the churchyard. “I was afeared you’d be late. ’Spose you come from Upper Furlong. How’s your voice?”

“Aw, featish (fairish). I zucked a thrush’s egg to clear un.”

“Arl right, Jabez; mind as you doan’t zeng too fast. It be your fault, shepherd, it be your fault.”

For Jabez was the leader of the choir. “Nash!” cried a stern voice, and the clerk jumped and tore his hat off at the sound. “Catch those boys!”

It was Squire Thorpe, whose magisterial eye had at once detected the youthful gamblers behind the buttress. Nash rushed towards them; but they had scented the Squire’s arrival, and dodged him round the big tombstones. Thorpe turned to the two farmers, who lifted their hats.

“Grass coming on nicely, Hedges,” said he. “Ought to be a good hay year.”

The Squire was as fond of gossip as any man in the parish; but he was rather late that morning; for he had hardly taken his stand by the wall when the “dill-dill” of the bell came to a sudden stop. The two gentlemen who had gone out into the field returned at a run.

“Ah, here you are!” said the Squire; and the three walked rapidly to the chancel door.

Ruck and Hedges, however, showed no signs of moving. A low hum arose from the hand-organ within; still they leant on the wall, deferring action to the last moment.

The sound of voices—the speakers clearly almost out of breath, but none the less talking—approached the wicket-gate, and three bonnets appeared above the wall there.

“It be the Greene Ferne folk,” said Hedges. “Measter Newton and t’other chap was too much in a hurry.”

Three ladies—two young and one middle-aged—entered the churchyard. The taller of the two girls left the path, and ran to a tomb inclosed with low iron railings. She carried a whole armful of spring flowers, gathered in the meadows

and copses *en route*, bluebells and cowslips chiefly, and threw them broadcast on the grave.

“Miss Margaret don’t forget her feyther,” said Hedges.

The three, as they passed, nodded smilingly to the two farmers, and went into the church.

“May Fisher be allus down at the Estcourts”, said Ruck. “S’pose her finds it dull up on the hills with the old man.”

“Mrs Estcourt looks well,” said Hedges. “Warn hur’ll marry agen some day. Miss Margaret do dress a bit, you.”

“Nation gay. Hur be a upstanding girl, that Margaret Estcourt. A’ got a thousand pound under the will.”

“And the Greene Ferne Farm when the widder goes.”

“Five hundred acres freehold, and them housen in to town.”

“A’ be a featish-looking girl, you.”

“So be May Fisher; but a’ bean’t such a queen as Mother. Margaret walks as if the parish belonged to her.”

“If a’ did, her would sell un, and buy a new bonnet. These yer wimmen!”

The sound of singing came from the open door under the tower hard by.

“Dall’d if it bean’t ‘I will arise.’”

“S’pose us had better go in.” They walked to the tower-door. It was arched and low—so low that to enter it was necessary to stoop, and inside the pavement was a step beneath the level of the ground. Within stood the font, and by it some forms against the wall, on which the school children left their caps. There was a space behind the first pillar of the side-aisle unoccupied by pews, being dark and not affording a view of the pulpit. Now it was possible to tell

the rank of the congregation as they entered, by the length of time each kept his hat on after getting through the door. The shepherd or carter took off his hat the moment he set his hobnailed boot down on the stone flags with a clatter. The wheelwright, who had a little money and a house of his own, wore his hat till he got to the font. So did the ale-house keeper, who had the grace to come to church. So did the small farmers. Ruck, who could write a cheque for a thousand pounds, never removed his till he arrived at the step that led down to the side-aisle. Hedges, who was higher in the rank of society, inasmuch as he had been born in the purple of farming, kept his on till he reached the first pillar. One of the semi-gentlemen-farmers actually walked half-way to his pew-door wearing his hat, though the congregation were standing listening to Jabez and the choir get through the introductory chant.

Entering from the beautiful sunshine, the church gave the impression of a rather superior tomb. It struck chilly, as if the cold of the last five or six centuries had got into it and could not be driven out. Cold rose up from the tombs under the aisles—cold emanated from the walls, where slabs spoke of the dead—cold came down from the very roof. Whitewashed walls, whitewashed pillars—everything plain, bare, hard. The only colour to be seen was furnished by two small stained-glass windows, and the faded gilt and paint of the royal arms over the chancel; the lion and the unicorn in the middle, and the names of the churchwardens who reigned when it was put up on either side. The pews in the centre were modern; those in the side-aisles high, like boxes. There might, perhaps, have been forty people in the

church altogether—all crowded up towards the chancel: the back seats were quite empty. If a modest stranger went into such a back seat, and helped himself to the Prayer-book he might find there, the covers came off in his hand, and displayed a mass of sawdust-like borings thrown up by the grubs that had eaten their way right through the prayer for King William IV. A cheerless edifice—tomb-like; and yet there were some to whom it had grown very dear in the passage of years, and others to whom it was equally dear because of associations. So it was that this chilly, harsh, repellent place—squat rather than built on the edge of the hills—was beloved far more by some of the worshippers therein than those grand vaulted cathedrals whose vastness seems to remove them from human sympathy. But how marked the contrast between the sunshine, the blue sky, the song of birds, the soft warm air, the green leaf and bud without!

Squire Thorpe’s pew of black oak occupied one entire side of the chancel; the choir and the barrel-organ were together, far down the side-aisle. From the raised dais of the chancel every member of the congregation could be discerned with ease. While the Rev. Basil Thorpe, cousin of the Squire, “droned in the pulpit,” or rather reading-desk, the Squire, sitting, kneeling, or standing, surveyed with keen glance every nook and corner. This severe and continuous examination did not in the least interfere with his devotions. Such is the dual character of the mind, that he uttered the responses earnestly in his sonorous tones, and at the same moment noted the two wenches giggling with the plough-boy behind the pillar. His imagination followed the lesson and saw the patriarchal life on the plains

of Chaldea, while his physical eye watched the grey-haired “fore-father” in his blue smock-frock, who, leaning his chin upon his ashen staff, traced the words with his horny finger on the book. The school children sat on forms placed endwise down the centre aisle. He saw one near the top stealthily produce an apple, and after taking a bite hand it to the next. All down the row it went, each nibbling in turn, and the final receiver putting the core in his pocket. Such innocent tricks did not annoy him in the least—his mind was broad enough to make allowances for the little weaknesses of human nature—the one thing that hurt him was the empty pews. He looked to see who was absent. He knew every inhabitant of the parish, and as it were checked them off mentally. It was a process he went through every Sunday with the same depressing result. The church was practically deserted: he hardly dared own to himself how small was the percentage that attended. Now the Squire felt no animosity against Bethel Chapel—he was candid enough to own that Basil was dull in the pulpit and somewhat mistaken in the tone of his intercourse with the poor. Still, to desert the church was as if a man turned his back on his own father, and preferred to sit at a stranger’s hearth. He could not help associating it with that general divorce, as it were, of the people from authority, the general contempt for property and capital, the loss of respect for institutions of all kinds, that is so striking a feature of modern English life. Then his gaze fell on the group of three ladies in a high old-fashioned pew, and he marked Margaret’s bonnet.

“Another,” was his thought—“another since last week. But she is singularly handsome, and so like her poor father.”

And his gaze grew gentle, noting the empty corner of the pew where the stalwart frame of his oldest friend had sat till darkness closed the eye of the boldest of riders and keenest of shots. Involuntarily he looked across at the marble tablet on the opposite wall of the chancel—set there at his own special wish—and read:

To The Beloved Memory
of
Warren Estcourt.

The black lettering on the pure white marble grew dim; his eyes became misty. Then came the sorrowful, and yet assured, prayer:

“Make them to be numbered with Thy saints: in glory everlasting.”

Rude voices chanted it—voices used to the roaring of the wind in the trees and the hiss of the rain on the hill. Yet as they stood there and gave forth the old, old words that have been linked with human fate so many centuries, there came a meaning through the hoarse harsh notes.

A tear fell on the broad yellow page of the old Prayer-book the Squire held so closely to his face. This was why the low grey church was so dear to him; it was full of the past. Shadowy forms hid behind the pillars; faces looked down from the worm-eaten rafters; bright and yet quick-fading groups of other days appeared through the greenish-yellow panes of the windows.