

AFTER LONDON, or WILD ENGLAND  
by Richard Jefferies

Oliver's whole delight was in exercise and sport. The boldest rider, the best swimmer, the best at leaping, at hurling the dart or the heavy hammer, ever ready for tilt or tournament, his whole life was spent with horse, sword, and lance. A year younger than Felix, he was at least ten years physically older. He measured several inches more round the chest; his massive shoulders and immense arms, brown and hairy, his powerful limbs, tower-like neck, and somewhat square jaw were the natural concomitants of enormous physical strength.

All the blood and bone and thew and sinew of the house seemed to have fallen to his share; all the fiery, restless spirit and defiant temper; all the utter recklessness and warrior's instinct. He stood every inch a man, with dark, curling, short-cut hair, brown cheek and Roman chin, trimmed moustache, brown eye, shaded by long eyelashes and well-marked brows; every inch a natural king of men. That very physical preponderance and animal beauty was perhaps his bane, for his comrades were so many, and his love adventures so innumerable, that they left him no time for serious ambition.

Between the brothers there was the strangest mixture of affection and repulsion. The elder smiled at the excitement and energy of the younger; the younger openly despised the studious habits and solitary life of the elder. In time of real trouble and difficulty they would have been drawn together; as it was, there was little communion; the one went his way, and the other his. There was perhaps rather an inclination to detract from each other's achievements than to praise them, a species of jealousy or envy without personal dislike, if that can be understood. They were good friends, and yet kept apart.

Oliver made friends of all, and thwacked and banged his enemies into respectful silence. Felix made friends of none, and was equally despised by nominal friends and actual enemies. Oliver was open and jovial; Felix reserved and contemptuous, or sarcastic in manner. His slender frame, too tall for his width, was against him; he could neither lift the weights nor undergo the muscular strain readily borne by Oliver. It was easy to see that Felix, although nominally the eldest, had not yet reached his full development. A light complexion, fair hair and eyes, were also against him; where Oliver made conquests, Felix was unregarded. He laughed, but perhaps his secret pride was hurt.

There was but one thing Felix could do in the way of exercise and sport. He could shoot with the bow in a manner till then entirely unapproached. His arrows fell unerringly in the centre of the target, the swift deer and the hare were struck down with ease, and even the wood-pigeon in full flight. Nothing was safe from those terrible arrows. For this, and this only, his fame had gone forth; and even this was made a source of bitterness to him.

The nobles thought no arms worthy of men of descent but the sword and lance; missile weapons, as the dart and arrow, were the arms of retainers. His degradation was completed when, at a tournament, where he had mingled with the crowd, the Prince sent for him to shoot at the butt, and display his skill among the soldiery, instead of with the knights in the tilting ring. Felix shot, indeed, but shut his eyes that the arrow might go wide, and was jeered at as a failure even in that ignoble competition. Only by

an iron self-control did he refrain that day from planting one of the despised shafts in the Prince's eye.

But when Oliver joked him about his failure, Felix asked him to hang up his breastplate at two hundred yards. He did so, and in an instant a shaft was sent through it. After that Oliver held his peace, and in his heart began to think that the bow was a dangerous weapon.

"So you are late again this morning," said Oliver, leaning against the recess of the window, and placing his arms on it. The sunshine fell on his curly dark hair, still wet from the river. "Studying last night, I suppose?" turning over the parchment. "Why didn't you ride into town with me?"

"The water must have been cold this morning?" said Felix, ignoring the question.

"Yes; there was a slight frost, or something like it, very early, and a mist on the surface; but it was splendid in the pool. Why don't you get up and come? You used to."

"I can swim," said Felix laconically, implying that, having learnt the art, it no more tempted him. "You were late last night. I heard you put Night in."

"We came home in style; it was rather dusky, but Night galloped the Green Miles."

"Mind she doesn't put her hoof in a rabbit's hole, some night."

"Not that. She can see like a cat. I believe we got over the twelve miles in less than an hour. Sharp work, considering the hills. You don't inquire for the news."

"What's the news to me?"

"Well, there was a quarrel at the palace yesterday afternoon. The Prince told Louis he was a double-faced traitor, and Louis told the Prince he was a suspicious fool. It nearly came to blows, and Louis is banished."

"For the fiftieth time."

"This time it is more serious."

"Don't believe it. He will be sent for again this morning; cannot you see why?"

"No."

"If the Prince is really suspicious, he will never send his brother into the country, where he might be resorted to by discontented people. He will keep him close at hand."

"I wish the quarrelling would cease; it spoils half the fun; one's obliged to creep about the court and speak in whispers, and you can't tell whom you are talking to; they may turn on you if you say too much. There is no dancing either. I hate this moody state. I wish they would either dance or fight."