

But in the meanwhile the muse had found him also at the plough, and set him a-singing in the fields quite regardless of his ignorance of letters, whether in print or in writing. So when he had made a poem he committed it to memory. But sad enough for him, it would not stay there; and often when he wanted to repeat it to himself he found that it had fled forever. He thus lost many of his best poems. Nor did he fare much better for a long time after he had learned to write; for his letters were so ill-formed that he could not decipher them himself after they had been laid by for a week or two, and the only way he could preserve them was by immediately transcribing indoors what he had written at odd moments in the fields. He used to carry with him a pencil and a bit of coarse brown paper, in which soap or sugar had been wrapped, and with the crown of his stove-pipe hat for a table, wrote down his poems as he composed them at the plough or in his woodland rambles. But he had no idea that his performances were of any value to anybody but himself, and so careless was he about preserving them that he stowed them away as he wrote them in a hole in the mud wall of his cottage, a common receptacle for rubbish, and when a fire was needed in a hurry poor Clare's poems had to kindle it!

He kept his poetic faculty to himself for a long time, and none but his own family knew that he possessed the wondrous gift of song. But although he had to endure great hardship, and often to go to bed hungry, even when he was far into his teens, he never complained. He felt that he was somehow far above his fellows, and that nature was very friendly to him, if man was not, and made him unspeakably happy in his connection with her. He had the spiritual key which unlocked the beauty of the grass and flowers, the clouds and stars, and lived in a world of delight and blessedness of which they could form no conception. But he had never yet read a single book of poems, or any book but the Bible, for Helpstone was not at all literary, and he began to feel a yearning within him to see some of the great Bardic masterpieces, that he might compare his own simple utterances with them, and try to estimate his own true position. It chanced about this time that being in Stamford town he saw a copy of "Thompson's Seasons" put up in a book-seller's window for sale, price one shilling. He gazed long and wistfully at the prize, which he had heard of before, and as he left the window he resolved to

commence another round of starvation, and thus save up the money to buy it, as he had saved before, to pay for that month's "schooling." The next eight or nine weeks were a feverish time to him, for he was perpetually haunted with the thought that perhaps the book would be gone when he had got the shilling to pay for it! The moment, therefore, he had secured the last half-penny which made up the coveted amount, he set off early in the morning for Stamford, and arrived, wet with dew, which he had brushed from the seven miles of grassy fields and woods which he had travelled over, long before sleepy Stamford was awake. The imperturbable book-seller was sleeping out his morning dreams at leisure, when John Clare stood shivering at the door with heart-ache, lest the book for which he had sacrificed so much, should be gone. To his great joy, however, as soon as the great dreamer awoke and took down his shutters, John beheld it still in the window, and having purchased it, he rushed off pell mell for the country, and was scarcely outside the monastic walls of the old town, before he began to devour the contents as fast as he could decipher the words. Love helped him most miraculously. He had never read so fluently before; and long ere he had reached Bingly Park he also was inspired to make verses. But as this little episode in his life happened before he could write, he had to carry his verses in that treacherous memory of his, which for once served him until he could get them fully written down on paper. The piece thus produced was John Clare's first regularly mounted poem, and is called "The Morning Walk."

It was not until he arrived at the age of twenty-four that he ever thought of publishing. He was then at work as a ploughman at Bridge Casterton, in Rutlandshire, and he thought that perhaps he might better his condition, so hopeless in itself, both present and future, if he collected his best pieces and put them into a volume, especially if the wares should be lucky enough to sell. But here again the old difficulty stared him in the face—he had no money. However, thank God! he could starve once more to get it. That was a great consolation! and starve he did until he had scraped together one pound sterling, and with this money he published a prospectus of his book. But alas! seven subscribers only responded to his appeal. His printer, however, was a good man, and a discernor of talent, and through him the great publishing house of Taylor & Heney,