

Diary 1841

John Clare

July 18th, Sunday - Felt very melancholy. Went for a walk in the forest in the afternoon. Fell in with some gypsies, one of whom offered to assist in my escape from the madhouse by hiding me in his camp, to which I almost agreed. But I told him I had no money to start with; but if he would do so, I would promise him fifty pounds, and he agreed to do so before Saturday. On Friday I went again, but he did not seem so willing, so I said little about it. On Sunday I went and they were all gone. An old wide-awake hat and an old straw bonnet, of the plum-pudding sort, was left behind, and I put the hat in my pocket, thinking it might be useful for another opportunity. As good luck would have it, it turned out to be so.

July 19th, Monday - Did nothing.

July 20th, Tuesday - Reconnoitred the road the gypsey had taken, and found it a legible (!) one to make a movement; and having only honest courage and myself in my army, I led the way and my troops soon followed. But being careless in mapping down the road as the gypsey told me, I missed the lane to Enfield Town, and was going down Enfield Highway, till I passed the "Labour-in-vain" public-house, where a person who came out of the door told me the way. I walked down the lane gently, and was soon in Enfield Town, and by and by on the great York Road, where it was all plain sailing. Steering ahead, meeting no enemy and fearing none, I reached Stevenage, where, being night, I got over a gate, and crossed the corner of a green paddock. Seeing a pond or hollow in the corner, I was forced to stay off a respectable distance to keep from falling into it. My legs were nearly knocked up and began to stagger. I scaled over some old rotten palings into the yard, and then had higher palings to clamber over, to get into the shed or hovel; which I did with difficulty, being rather weak. To my good luck, I found some trusses of clover piled up, about six or more feet square, which I gladly mounted and slept on. There were some drags in the hovel, on which I could have reposed had I not found a better bed. I slept soundly, but had a very uneasy dream. I thought my first wife lay on my left arm, and somebody took her away from my side, which made me wake up rather unhappy. I thought as I awoke somebody said "Mary", but nobody was near. I lay down with my head towards the north, to show myself the steering point in the morning.

July 21st, Wednesday - Daylight was looking in on every side, and fearing my garrison might be taken by storm, and myself be made prisoner, I left my lodging by the way I got in, and thanked God for His kindness in procuring it. For anything in a famine is better than nothing, and any place that giveth the weary rest is a blessing. I gained the North Road again, and steered due north. On the left hand side, the road under the bank was like a cave; I saw a man and boy coiled up asleep, whom I hailed, and they awoke to tell me the name of the next village. Somewhere on the London side, near the "Plough" public-house, a man passed me on horseback, in a slop frock, and said, "Here's another of the broken-down haymakers," and threw me a penny to get a half pint of beer, which I picked up, and thanked him for, and when I got to the "Plough," I called for a half pint and drank it. I got a rest, and escaped a very heavy shower in the bargain, by having a shelter till it was over. Afterwards I would have begged a penny of two drovers, but they were very saucy; so I begged no more of anybody.

Having passed a lodge on the left hand, within a mile and a half, or less, of a town—I think it might be St. Ives, or it was St. Neot's, but I forget the name—I sat down to rest on a flint heap, for half an hour or more. While sitting here, I saw a tall gypsey come out of the lodge gate, and make down the road to where I was. When she got up to me, I saw she was a young woman, with a honest-looking countenance, and rather handsome. I spoke to her, and asked her a few questions, which she answered readily and with evident good humour. So I got up, and went onto the next town with her. She cautioned me on the way to put something in my hat to keep the crown up, and said in a lower tone, "You'll be noticed." But not knowing at what she hinted, I took no notice and made no reply. At length she pointed to a small church tower, which she called Shefford Church, and advised me to go on a footway, which would take me direct to it, and would shorten my journey fifteen (!) miles by doing so. I would gladly have taken the young woman's advice, feeling that it was honest, and a nigh guess towards the truth; but fearing I might lose my way, and not be able to find the North Road again, I thanked her, and told her I should keep to the road. She then bid me "good day," and went into a house or shop on the left hand side of the road.

Next I passed three or four good built houses on a hill, and a public-house on the roadside in the hollow below them. I seemed to pass the milestones very quick in the morning, but towards night they seemed to be stretched further asunder. I now got to a village of which I forget the name. The road on the left hand was quite overshadowed by trees, and quite dry. So I sat down half an hour, and made a good many wishes for breakfast. But wishes were no meal; so I got up as hungry as I sat down I forget here the names of the villages I passed through, but recollect at late evening going through Potton, in Bedfordshire, where I called in a house to light my pipe. There was a civil old woman, and a country wench making lace on a cushion as round as a globe, and a young fellow; all civil people. I asked them a few questions as to the way, and where the clergyman and overseer lived; but they scarcely heard me, and gave no answer. I then went through Potton, and happened to meet with a kind-talking countryman, who told me the parson lived a good way from where I was. So I went on hopping with a crippled foot; for the gravel had got into my old shoes, one of which had now nearly lost the sole. Had I found the overseer's house at hand, or the parson's, I should have given my name, and begged for a shilling to carry me home; but I was forced to brush on penniless, and be thankful I had a leg to move on. I then asked him whether he could tell me of a farm-yard anywhere on the road, where I could find a shed and some dry straw, and he said, "Yes, if you will go with me, I will show you the place; it is a public-house on the left hand side of the road, at the sign of the Ram." But seeing a stone heap, I longed to rest, as one of my feet was very painful. So I thanked him for his kindness, and bid him go on. But the good-natured fellow lingered awhile, as if wishing to conduct me; but suddenly recollecting that he had a hamper on his shoulder, and a lock-up bag in his hand, to meet the coach, he started hastily, and was soon out of sight.

I followed, looking in vain for the countryman's straw bed. Not being able to find it, I laid down by the wayside, under some elm trees. Between the wall and the trees there was a thick row, planted some five or six feet from the buildings. I laid there and tried to sleep; but the wind came in between the trees so cold that I quaked like having the ague, and I quitted this lodging to seek another at the "Ram," which I scarcely hoped to find. It now began to grow dark apace, and the odd houses on the road began to light up, and show the inside lot very comfortable, and my outside lot very uncomfortable and wretched. Still I hobbled forward as well as I could, and at last came the "Ram." The shutters were not closed, and the lighted window looked very cheering; but I had no money, and did not like to go in. There was a sort of shed, or gig-house, at the end; but I did not like to lie there, as the people were up; so I still travelled on. The road was very lonely and dark, being overshadowed with trees. At length I came to a place where the road branched off into two turnpikes, one to the right about, and the other straight forward. On going by, I saw a milestone standing under the hedge, and I turned back to read it, to see where the other road led to. I found it led to London. I then suddenly forgot which was north or south, and though I narrowly examined both ways, I could see no tree, or bush, or stone heap that I could recollect having passed.

I went on mile after mile, almost convinced I was going the same way I had come. These thoughts were so strong upon me, and doubts and hopelessness made me turn so feeble, that I was scarcely able to walk. Yet I could not sit down or give up, but shuffled along till I saw a lamp shining as bright as the moon, which, on nearing, I found was suspended over a tollgate. Before I got through, the man came out with a candle, and eyed me narrowly; but having no fear I stopped to ask him whether I was going northward. He said, "When you get through the gate you are." I thanked him, and went through to the other side, and gathered my old strength as my doubts vanished. I soon cheered up, and hummed the air of "Highland Mary" as I went on. I at length came to an odd house, all alone, near a wood; but I could not see what the sign was, though it seemed to stand, oddly enough, in a sort of trough, or spout. There was a large porch over the door, and being weary I crept in, and was glad enough to find I could lie with my legs straight.

The inmates were all gone to rest, for I could hear them turn over in bed, while I lay at full length on the stones in the porch. I slept here till daylight, and felt very much refreshed. I blest my two wives and both their families when I laid down and when I got up in the morning. I have but a slight recollection of my journey between here and Stilton, for I was knocked up, and noticed little or nothing. One night I laid in a dyke-bottom, sheltered from the wind, and went asleep for half an hour. When I awoke, I found one side wet through from the water; so I got out and went on. I remember going down a very dark road, hung over on both sides with thick trees; it seemed to extend a mile or two. I then entered a town, where some of the chamber windows had lights shining in them. I felt so weak here that I was forced to sit on the ground to rest myself, and while I sat here a coach that seemed heavily laden came rattling up, and splashing the mud in my face wakened me from a doze. When I had knocked the gravel out of my shoes I started again. There was little to notice, for the road very often looked as stupid as myself. I was often half asleep as I went on.

The third day I satisfied my hunger by eating the grass on the roadside, which seemed to taste something like bread. I was hungry, and eat heartily till I was satisfied; in fact, the meal seemed to do me good. The next and last day I remembered that I had some tobacco, and my box of lucifers being exhausted, I could not light my pipe. So I took to chewing tobacco all day, and eat it when I had done. I was never hungry afterwards. I remember passing through Buckden, and going a length of road afterwards; but I do not recollect the name of any place until I came to Stilton, where I was completely footsore, bleeding, and broken down. When I had got about half way through the town, a gravel causeway invited me to rest myself; so I laid down and nearly went to sleep. A young woman, as I guessed by the voice, came out of a house, and said, "Poor creature;" and another more elderly said, "Oh, he shams." But when I got up the latter said, "Oh no, he don't," as I hobbled along very lame. I heard the voices, but never looked back to see where they came from. When I got near the inn at the end of the gravel walk, I met two young women, and asked one of them whether the road branching to the right by the inn did not lead to Peterborough. She said, "Yes." As soon as ever I was on it, I felt myself on the way home, and went on rather more cheerful, though I was forced to rest oftener than usual.

Before I got to Peterborough, a man and woman passed in a cart; and on hailing me as they passed, I found they were neighbours from Helpston, where I used to live. I told them I was knocked-up, which they could easily see, and that I had neither food nor drink since I left Essex. When I had told my story they clubbed together and threw me fivepence out of the cart. I picked it up, and called at a small public-house near the bridge, where I had two half pints of ale, and twopennyworth of bread and cheese. When I had done, I started quite refreshed; only my feet were more crippled than ever, and I could scarcely bear walk over the stones. Yet I was half ashamed to sit down in the street, and forced myself to keep on the move.

I got through Peterborough better than I expected. When I came to the high road, I rested on the stone-heaps, till I was able to go on afresh. By-and-by I passed Walton, and soon reached Werrington. I was making for the "Beehive" as fast as I could when a cart met me, with a man, a woman, and a boy in it. When nearing me the woman jumped out and caught fast hold of my hands, and wished me to get into the cart. But I refused; I thought her either drunk or mad. But when I was told it was my second wife, Patty, I got in, and was soon at Northborough. But Mary was not there; neither could I get any information about her further than the old story of her having died six years ago. But I took no notice of the lie, having seen her myself twelve months ago, alive and well, and as young as ever. So here I am hopeless at home."

