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\*\*\* START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK JESSE CLIFFE \*\*\*

# JESSE CLIFFE.

By Mary Russell Mitford

Living as we do in the midst of rivers, water in all its forms, except indeed that of the trackless and mighty ocean, is familiar to our little inland county. The slow majestic Thames, the swift and wandering Kennett, the clear and brimming Loddon, all lend life and verdure to our rich and fertile valleys. Of the great river of England—whose course from its earliest source, near Cirencester, to where it rolls calm, equable, and full, through the magnificent bridges of our splendid metropolis, giving and reflecting beauty,\* presents so grand an image of power in repose—it is not now my purpose to speak; nor am I about to expatiate on that still nearer and dearer stream, the pellucid Loddon,—although to be rowed by one dear and near friend up those transparent and meandering waters, from where they sweep at their extremest breadth under the lime-crowned terraces of the Old Park at Aberleigh, to the pastoral meadows of Sandford, through which the narrowed current wanders so brightly—now impeded by beds of white water-lilies, or feathery-blossomed bulrushes, or golden flags—now overhung by thickets of the rich wayfaring tree, with its wealth of glorious berries, redder and more transparent than rubies—now spanned from side to side by the fantastic branches of some aged oak;—although to be rowed along that clear stream, has long been amongst the choicest of my summer pleasures, so exquisite is the scenery, so perfect and so unbroken the solitude. Even the shy and foreign-looking kingfisher, most gorgeous of English birds, who, like the wild Indian retiring before the foot of man, has nearly deserted our populous and cultivated country, knows and loves the lovely valley of the Loddon.

*\* There is nothing finer in London than the view from Waterloo-bridge on a July evening, whether coloured by the gorgeous hues of the setting sun reflected on the water in tenfold glory, or illuminated by a thousand twinkling lights from lamps, and boats, and houses, mingling with the mild beams of the rising moon. The calm and glassy river, gay with unnumbered vessels; the magnificent buildings which line its shores; the combination of all that is loveliest in art or in nature, with all that is most animating in motion and in life, produce a picture gratifying alike to the eye and to the heart—and the more exhilarating, or rather perhaps the more soothing, because, for London, so singularly peaceful and quiet. It is like some gorgeous town in fairyland, astir with busy and happy creatures, the hum of whose voices comes floating from the craft upon the river, or the quays by the water side. Life is there, and sound and motion; but blessedly free from the jostling of the streets, the rattling of the pavement, the crowd, the confusion, the tumult, and the din of the work-a-day world.*

*There is nothing in the great city like the scene from Waterloo bridge at sunset. I see it in my mind's eye at this instant.*

It is not, however, of the Loddon that I am now to speak. The scene of my little story belongs to a spot quite as solitary, but far less beautiful, on the banks of the Kennett, which, a few miles before its junction with the Thames, passes through a tract of wild, marshy country—water-meadows at once drained and fertilised by artificial irrigation, and totally unmixed with arable land; so that the fields being for the most part too wet to admit the feeding of cattle, divided by deep ditches, undotted by timber, unchequered by cottages, and untraversed by roads, convey in their monotonous expanse (except perhaps at the gay season of haymaking) a feeling of dreariness and desolation, singularly contrasted with the picturesque and varied scenery, rich, glowing, sunny, bland, of the equally solitary Loddon meadows.

A large portion of these English prairies, comprising a farm called the Moors, was, at the time of which I write, in the occupation of a wealthy yeoman named John Cobbam, who, the absentee tenant of an absentee landlord, resided upon a small property of his own about two miles distant, leaving the large deserted house, and dilapidated outbuildings, to sink into gradual decay. Barns half unthatched, tumble-down cart-houses, palings rotting to pieces, and pigsties in ruins, contributed, together with a grand collection of substantial and dingy ricks of fine old hay—that most valuable but most gloomy looking species of agricultural property—to the general aspect of desolation by which the place was distinguished. One solitary old labourer, a dreary bachelor, inhabited, it is true, a corner of the old roomy house, calculated for the convenient accommodation of the patriarchal family of sons and daughters, men-servants and maid-servants, of which a farmer's household consisted in former days; and one open window, (the remainder were bricked up to avoid taxes,) occasionally a door ajar, and still more rarely a thin wreath of smoke ascending from one of the cold dismal-looking chimneys, gave token that the place was not wholly abandoned. But the uncultivated garden, the grass growing in the bricked court, the pond green with duckweed, and the absence of all living things, cows, horses, pigs, turkeys, geese, or chickens—and still more of those talking, as well as living things, women and children—all impressed on the beholder that strange sensation of melancholy which few can have failed to experience at the sight of an uninhabited human habitation. The one solitary inmate failed to relieve the pressing sense of solitude. Nothing but the ringing sound of female voices, the pleasant and familiar noise of domestic animals, could have done that; and nothing approaching to noise was ever heard in the Moors. It was a silence that might be felt.

The house itself was approached through a long, narrow lane, leading from a wild and watery common; a lane so deeply excavated between the adjoining hedge-rows, that in winter it was little better than a water-course; and beyond the barns and stables, where even that apology for a road terminated, lay the extensive tract of low, level, marshy ground from whence the farm derived its title; a series of flat, productive water-meadows, surrounded partly by thick coppices, partly by the winding Kennett, and divided by deep and broad ditches; a few pollard willows, so old that the trunk was, in some, riven asunder, whilst in others nothing but the mere shell remained, together with here and there a stunted thorn, alone relieving the monotony of the surface.

The only regular inhabitant of this dreary scene was, as I have before said, the old labourer, Daniel Thorpe, who slept in one corner of the house, partly to prevent its total dilapidation, and to preserve the valuable hayricks and the tumble-down farm buildings from the pillage to which unprotected property is necessarily exposed, and partly to keep in repair the long line of boundary fence, to clean the graffages, clear out the moat-like ditches, and see that the hollow-sounding wooden bridges which formed the sole communication by which the hay wagons could pass to and from the distant meadows, were in proper order to sustain their ponderous annual load. Daniel Thorpe was the only accredited unfeathered biped who figured in the parish books as occupant of The Moors; nevertheless that swampy district could boast of one other irregular and forbidden but most pertinacious inhabitant—and that inhabitant was our hero, Jesse Cliffe.

Jesse Cliffe was a lad some fifteen or sixteen years of age—there or thereabout; for with the exact date of his birth, although from circumstances most easily ascertained, even the assistant-overseer did not take the trouble to make himself acquainted. He was a parish child born in the workhouse, the offspring of a half-witted orphan girl and a sturdy vagrant, partly tinker, partly ballad-singer, who took good care to disappear before the strong arm of justice, in the shape of a tardy warrant and a halting constable, could contrive to intercept his flight. He joined, it was said, a tribe of gipsies, to whom he was suspected to have all along belonged; and who vanishing at the same time, accompanied by half the linen and poultry of the neighbourhood, were never heard of in our parts again; whilst the poor girl whom he had seduced and abandoned, with sense enough to feel her misery, although hardly sufficient to be responsible for the sin, fretted, moaned, and pined—losing, she hardly knew how, the half-unconscious light-heartedness which had almost seemed a compensation for her deficiency of intellect, and with that light-heartedness losing also her bodily strength, her flesh, her colour, and her appetite, until, about a twelvemonth after the birth of her boy, she fell into a decline and died.

Poor Jesse, born and reared in the workhouse, soon began to evince symptoms of the peculiarities of both his parents. Half-witted like his mother, wild and roving as his father—it was found impossible to check his propensity to an out-of-door life.

From the moment, postponed as long as possible in such establishments, in which he doffed the petticoat—a moment, by the way, in which the obstinate and masterful spirit of the ungentle sex often begins to show itself in nurseries of a far more polished description;—from that moment may Jesse's wanderings be said to commence. Disobedience lurked in the habit masculine. The wilful urchin stood, like some dandy apprentice, contemplating his brown sturdy legs, as they stuck out from his new trowsers, already (such was the economy of the tailor employed on the occasion) "a world too *short*," and the first use he made of those useful supporters was to run away. So little did any one really care for the poor child, that not being missed till night-fall, or sought after till the next morning, he had strayed far enough, when, at last picked up, and identified by the parish mark on his new jacket, to be half frozen, (it was mid-winter when his first elopement happened,) half-starved, half-drowned, and more than half-dead of fatigue and exhaustion. "It will be a

lesson!" said the moralising matron of the workhouse, as, after a sound scolding, she fed the little culprit and put him to bed. "It will be a lesson to the rover!" And so it proved; for, after being recruited by a few days' nursing, he again ran away, in a different direction.

When recovered the second time, he was whipped as well as fed—another lesson which only made the stubborn recusant run the faster. Then, upon his next return, they shut him up in a dark den appropriately called the black-hole, a restraint which, of course, increased his zest for light and liberty, and in the first moment of freedom—a moment greatly accelerated by his own strenuous efforts in the shape of squalling, bawling, roaring, and stamping, unparalleled and insupportable, even in that mansion of din—in the very instant of freedom he was off again; he ran away from work; he ran away from school; certain to be immersed in his dismal dungeon as soon as he could be recaptured; so that his whole childhood became a series of alternate imprisonments and escapes.

That he should be so often lost was, considering his propensities and the proverbial cunning of his caste, not, perhaps, very remarkable. But the number of times and the variety of ways, in which, in spite of the little trouble taken in searching for him, he was sent back to the place from whence he came, was really something wonderful. If any creature in the world had cared a straw for the poor child, he must have been lost over and over: nobody did care for him, and he was as sure to turn up as a bad guinea. He has been cried like *Found Goods* in Belford Market: advertised like a strayed donkey in the *H—shire Courant*; put for safe keeping into compters, cages, roundhouses, and bridewells: passed, by different constables, through half the parishes in the county; and so frequently and minutely described in handbills and the *Hue and Cry*, that by the time he was twelve years old, his stature, features, and complexion were as well known to the rural police as those of some great state criminal. In a word, "the lad *would* live;" and the Aberleigh overseers, who would doubtless have been far from inconsolable if they had never happened to hear of him again, were reluctantly obliged to make the best of their bargain.

Accordingly, they placed him as a sort of boy of all-work at "the shop" at Hinton, where he remained, upon an accurate computation, somewhere about seven hours; they then put him with a butcher at Langley, where he staid about five hours and a-half, arriving at dusk, and escaping before midnight: then with a baker at Belford, in which good town he sojourned the (for him) unusual space of two nights and a day; and then they apprenticed him to Master Samuel Goddard, an eminent dealer in cattle leaving his new master to punish him according to law, provided he should run away again. Run away of course he did; but as he had contrived to earn for himself a comfortably bad character for stupidity and laziness, and as he timed his evasion well—during the interval between the sale of a bargain of Devonshire stots, and the purchase of a lot of Scotch kyloes, when his services were little needed—and as Master Samuel Goddard had too much to do and to think of, to waste his time and his trouble on a search after a heavy-looking under-drover, with a considerable reputation for laziness, Jesse, for the first time in his life, escaped his ordinary penalties of pursuit and discovery—the parish officers contenting themselves by notifying to Master Samuel Goddard, that they considered their responsibility, legal as well as moral, completely transferred to him in virtue of their indentures, and that whatever might be the future destiny of his unlucky apprentice, whether frozen or famished, hanged or drowned, the blame would rest with the cattle-dealer aforesaid, to whom they resolved to refer all claims on their protection, whether advanced by Jesse himself or by others.

Small intention had Jesse Cliffe to return to their protection or their workhouse! The instinct of freedom was strong in the poor boy—quick and strong as in the beast of the field, or the bird of the air. He betook himself to the Moors (one of his earliest and favourite haunts) with a vague assurance of safety in the deep solitude of those wide-spreading meadows, and the close coppices that surrounded them: and at little more than twelve years of age he began a course of lonely, half-savage, self-dependent life, such as has been rarely heard of in this civilised country. How he lived is to a certain point a mystery. Not by stealing. That was agreed on all hands—except indeed, so far as a few roots of turnips and potatoes, and a few ears of green corn, in their several seasons, may be called theft. Ripe corn for his winter's hoard, he gleaned after the fields were cleared, with a scrupulous honesty that might have read a lesson to peasant children of a happier nurture. And they who had opportunities to watch the process, said that it was curious to see him bruise the grain between large stones, knead the rude flour with fair water, mould his simple cakes, and then bake them in a primitive oven formed by his own labour in a dry bank of the coppice, and heated by rotten wood shaken from the tops of the trees, (which he climbed like a squirrel,) and kindled by a flint and a piece of an old horse-shoe:—such was his unsophisticated cookery! Nuts and berries from the woods; fish from the Kennett—caught with such tackle as might be constructed of a stick and a bit of packthread, with a strong pin or needle formed into a hook; and perhaps an occasional rabbit or partridge, entrapped by some such rough and inartificial contrivance, formed his principal support; a modified, and, according to his vague notions of right and wrong, an innocent form of poaching, since he sought only what was requisite for his own consumption, and would have shunned as a sin the killing game to sell. Money, indeed, he little needed. He formed his bed of fern or dead grass, in the deepest recesses of the coppice—a natural shelter; and the renewal of raiment, which warmth and decency demanded, he obtained by emerging from his solitude, and joining such parties as a love of field sports brought into his vicinity in the pursuit of game—an inspiring combination of labour and diversion, which seemed to awaken something like companionship and sympathy even in this wild boy of the Moors, one in which his knowledge of the haunts and habits of wild animals, his strength, activity, and actual insensibility to hardship or fatigue, rendered his services of more than ordinary value. There was not so good a hare-finder throughout that division of the county; and it was curious to observe how completely his skill in sportmanship overcame the contempt with which grooms and gamekeepers, to say nothing of their less fine and more tolerant masters, were wont to regard poor Jesse's ragged garments, the sunburnt hair and skin, the want of words to express even his simple meaning, and most of all, the strange obliquity of taste which led him to prefer Kennett water to Kennett ale. Sportsmanship, sheer sportsmanship, carried him through all!

Jesse was, as I have said, the most popular hare-finder of the country-side, and during the coursing season was brought by that good gift into considerable communication with his fellow creatures: amongst the rest with his involuntary landlord, John Cobham.

John Cobham was a fair specimen of an English yeoman of the old school—honest, generous, brave, and

kind; but in an equal degree, ignorant, obstinate and prejudiced. His first impression respecting Jesse had been one of strong dislike, fostered and cherished by the old labourer Daniel Thorpe, who, accustomed for twenty years to reign sole sovereign of that unpeopled territory, was as much startled at the sight of Jesse's wild, ragged figure, and sunburnt face, as Robinson Crusoe when he first spied the track of a human foot upon *his* desert island. It was natural that old Daniel should feel his monarchy, or, more correctly speaking, his vice-royalty, invaded and endangered; and at least equally natural that he should communicate his alarm to his master, who sallied forth one November morning to the Moors, fully prepared to drive the intruder from his grounds, and resolved, if necessary, to lodge him in the County Bridewell before night.

But the good farmer, who chanced to be a keen sportsman, and to be followed that day by a favourite greyhound, was so dulcified by the manner in which the delinquent started a hare at the very moment of Venus's passing, and still more by the culprit's keen enjoyment of a capital single-handed course, (in which Venus had even excelled herself,) that he could not find in his heart to take any harsh measures against him, for that day at least, more especially as Venus seemed to have taken a fancy to the lad—so his expulsion was postponed to another season; and before that season arrived, poor Jesse had secured the goodwill of an advocate far more powerful than Venus—an advocate who, contrasted with himself, looked like Ariel by the side of Caliban, or Titania watching over Bottom the Weaver.

John Cobham had married late in life, and had been left, after seven years of happy wedlock, a widower with five children. In his family he may be said to have been singularly fortunate, and singularly unfortunate. Promising in no common degree, his sons and daughters, inheriting their mother's fragile constitution as well as her amiable character, fell victims one after another to the flattering and fatal disease which had carried her off in the prime of life; one of them only, the eldest son, leaving any issue; and his little girl, an orphan, (for her mother had died in bringing her into the world,) was now the only hope and comfort of her dotting grandfather, and of a maiden sister who lived with him as housekeeper, and, having officiated as head-nurse in a nobleman's family, was well calculated to bring up a delicate child.

And delicate in all that the word conveys of beauty—delicate as the Virgins of Guido, or the Angels of Correggio, as the valley lily or the maiden rose—was at eight years old, the little charmer, Phoebe Cobham. But it was a delicacy so blended with activity and power, so light and airy, and buoyant and spirited, that the admiration which it awakened was wholly unmingled with fear. Fair, blooming, polished, and pure, her complexion had at once the colouring and the texture of a flower-leaf; and her regular and lovely features—the red smiling lips, the clear blue eyes, the curling golden hair, and the round yet slender figure—formed a most rare combination of childish beauty. The expression, too, at once gentle and lively, the sweet and joyous temper, the quick intellect, and the affectionate heart, rendered little Phoebe one of the most attractive children that the imagination can picture. Her grandfather idolised her; taking her with him in his walks, never weary of carrying her when her own little feet were tired—and it was wonderful how many miles those tiny feet, aided by the gay and buoyant spirit, would compass in the course of the day; and so bent upon keeping her constantly with him, and constantly in the open air, (which he justly considered the best means of warding off the approach of that disease which had proved so fatal to his family,) that he even had a pad constructed, and took her out before him on horseback.

A strange contrast formed the old farmer, so gruff and bluff-looking—with his stout square figure, his weather-beaten face, short grey hair, and dark bushy eyebrows—to the slight and graceful child, her aristocratic beauty set off by exactly the same style of paraphernalia that had adorned the young Lady Janes and Lady Marys, Mrs. Dorothy's former charge, and her habitual grace of demeanour adding fresh elegance to the most studied elegancies of the toilet! A strange contrast!—but one which seemed as nothing compared with that which was soon to follow: for Phoebe, happening to be with her grandfather and her great friend and playmate Venus, a jet-black greyhound of the very highest breed, whose fine limbed and shining beauty was almost as elegant and aristocratic as that of Phoebe herself;—the little damsel, happening to be with her grandfather when, instigated by Daniel Thorpe's grumbling accusation of broken fences and I know not what, he was a second time upon the point of warning poor Jesse off the ground—was so moved by the culprit's tattered attire and helpless condition, as he stood twirling, between his long lean fingers, the remains of what had once been a hat, that she interceded most warmly in his behalf.

"Don't turn him off the Moors, grandpapa," said Phoebe, "pray don't! Never mind old Daniel! I'm sure he'll do no harm;—will you, Jesse? Venus likes him, grandpapa; see how she puts her pretty nose into his hand; and Venus never likes bad people. How often I have heard you say that. And *I* like him, poor fellow! He looks so thin and so pitiful. Do let him stay, dear grandpapa!"

And John Cobham sat down on the bank, and took the pitying child in his arms, and kissed and blessed her, and said, that, since she wished it, Jesse *should* stay; adding, in a sort of soliloquy, that he hoped she never would ask him to do what was wrong, for he could refuse her nothing.

And Jesse—what did he say to these, the first words of kindness that he had ever heard from human lips? or rather, what did he feel? for beyond a muttered "Thankye," speak he could not, But gratitude worked strongly in the poor boy's heart: gratitude!—so new, so overpowering, and inspired by one so sweet, so lovely, so gentle as his protectress, as far as he was concerned, all-powerful; and yet a mere infant whom he might protect as well as serve! It was a strange mixture of feelings, all good, and all delightful; a stirring of impulses, a quickening of affections, a striking of chords never touched before. Substitute the sacred innocence of childhood for the equally sacred power of virgin purity, and his feelings of affectionate reverence, of devoted service and submission, much resembled those entertained by the Satyr towards "the holy shepherdess," in Fletcher's exquisite drama.\*

*Our*

*"Rough thing, who never knew  
Manners nor smooth humanity,"*

could not have spoken nor have thought such words as those of the satyr; but so far as our English climate and his unfruitful territory might permit, he put much of the poetry into action. Sluggish of intellect, and uncouth of demeanour, as the poor lad seemed, it was quite wonderful how quickly he discovered the several



ways in which he might best please and gratify his youthful benefactress.

*\* That matchless Pastoral, "The Faithful Shepherdess," is so much less known than talked of, that subjoin the passage in question. One more beauti can hardly be found in the wide range of English poetry.*

*Satyr. Through yon same bending plain That flings his arms down to the main; And through these thick woods, have I run, Whose depths have never kiss'd the sun; Since the lusty Spring began, All to please my master, Pan, Have I trotted without rest To get him fruit; for at a feast He entertains, this coming night, His paramour, the Syrinx bright.*

*[He sees Clorin and stands amazed.*

*But behold a fairer sight!  
By that heavenly form of thine,  
Brightest fair, thou art divine,  
Sprung from great, immortal race  
Of the Gods; for in thy face  
Shines more awful majesty,  
Than dull, weak mortality  
Dare with misty eyes behold  
And live! Therefore on this mould  
Slowly do I bend my knee,  
In worship of thy deity.  
Deign it, goddess, from my hand  
To receive whate'er this land,  
From her fertile womb doth send  
Of her choice fruits; and but lend  
Belief to that the Satyr tells:  
Fairer by the famous wells  
To this present day ne'er grew,  
Never better nor more true.  
Here be grapes whose lusty blood  
Is the learned poet's good;  
Sweeter yet did never crown  
The head of Bacchus; nuts more brown  
Than the squirrel whose teeth crack 'em.  
Deign, oh fairest fair, to take 'em!  
For these black-eyed Dryope  
Hath often times commanded me,  
With my clasped knee to climb;  
See how well the lusty time  
Hath deck'd their rising cheeks in red,  
Such as on your lips is spread.  
Here be berries for a queen,  
Some be red, and some be green;  
These are of that luscious sweet,  
The great god Pan himself doth eat;  
All these, and what the woods can yield,  
The hanging mountain, or the field,  
I freely offer, and ere long  
Will bring you more, more sweet and strong;  
Till when, humbly leave I take,  
Lest the great Pan do awake,  
That sleeping lies in a deep glade,  
Under a broad beech's shade.  
I must go,—I must run  
Swifter than the fiery sun.*

*Clorin. And all my fears go with thee!  
What greatness or what private hidden power  
Is there in me to draw submission  
From this rude man and beast? sure I am mortal;  
The daughter of a shepherd; he was mortal,  
And she that bore me mortal: Prick my hand  
And it will bleed; a fever shakes me, and  
The self-same wind that makes the young lambs shrink  
Makes me a-cold. My fear says I am mortal.  
Yet I hare heard (my mother told it me,  
And now I do believe it) if I keep  
My virgin flower uncropt, pure, chaste, and fair,  
No goblin, wood-god, fairy, elf, or fiend,  
Satyr, or other power, that haunts the groves,  
Shall hurt my body, or by vain illusion  
Draw me to wander after idle fires,  
Or voices calling me in dead of night  
To make me follow, and so tempt me on  
Through mire and standing pools to find my swain  
Else why should this rough thing, who never knew  
Manners nor smooth humanity, whose herds  
Are rougher than himself, and more misshapen,  
Thus mildly kneel to me? &c. &c.*

*Beaumont and Fletcher's Works,  
(Seward's edition,) vol. iii. p. 117–121.*

*How we track Milton's exquisite Comus in this no less exquisite pastoral Drama! and the imitation is so beautiful, that the perception of the plagiarism rather increases than diminishes the pleasure with which we read either deathless work. Republican although he were, the great poet sits a throned king upon Parnassus, privileged to cull*

Phoebe loved flowers; and from the earliest tuft of violets ensconced under the sunny southern hedge, to the last lingering sprig of woodbine shaded by some time-hallowed oak, the blossoms of the meadow and the coppice were laid under contribution for her posies.

Phoebe had her own little garden; and to fill that garden, Jesse was never weary of seeking after the roots of such wild plants as he himself thought pretty, or such as he found (one can hardly tell how) were considered by better judges to be worthy of a place in the parterre. The different orchises, for instance, the white and lilac primrose, the golden oxslip, the lily of the valley, the chequered fritillary, which blows so freely along the banks of the Kennett, and the purple campanula which covers with equal profusion the meadows of the Thames, all found their way to Phoebe's flower-plats. He brought her in summer evenings glow-worms enough to form a constellation on the grass; and would spend half a July day in chasing for her some glorious insect, dragon-fly, or bee-bird, or golden beetle, or gorgeous butterfly. He not only bestowed upon her sloes, and dew-berries, and hazel-nuts "brown as the squirrel whose teeth crack 'em," but caught for her the squirrel itself. He brought her a whole litter of dormice, and tamed for her diversion a young magpie, whose first effort at flattery was "Pretty Phoebe!"

But his greatest present of all, most prized both by donor and receiver, (albeit her tender heart smote her as she accepted it, and she made her faithful slave promise most faithfully to take nests no more,) was a grand string of birds' eggs, long enough to hang in festoons round, and round, and round her play-room, and sufficiently various and beautiful to gratify more fastidious eyes than those of our little heroine.

To collect this rope of variously-tinted beads—a natural rosary—he had sought the mossy and hair-lined nest of the hedge-sparrow for her turquoise-like rounds; had scrambled up the chimney-corner to bear away those pearls of the land, the small white eggs of the house-martin; had found deposited in an old magpie's nest the ovals of the sparrow-hawk, red and smooth as the finest coral; had dived into the ground-mansion of the skylark for her lilac-tinted shells, and groped amongst the bushes for the rosy-tinted ones of the woodlark; climbed the tallest trees for the sea-green eggs of the rooks; had pilfered the spotted treasures from the snug dwelling which the wren constructed in the eaves; and, worst of all—I hardly like to write it, I hardly care to think, that Jesse could have committed such an outrage,—saddest and worst of all, in the very midst of that varied garland might be seen the brown and dusky egg, as little showy as its quaker-like plumage, the dark brown egg, from which should have issued that "angel of the air," the songstress, famous in every land, the unparagoned nightingale. It is but just towards Jesse to add, that he took the nest in a mistake, and was quite unconscious of the mischief he had done until it was too late to repair it.

Of course these gifts were not only graciously accepted, but duly returned; cakes, apples, tarts, and gingerbread, halfpence in profusion, and now and then a new shilling, or a bright sixpence—all, in short, that poor Phoebe had to bestow, she showered upon her uncouth favourite, and she would fain have amended his condition by more substantial benefits: but authoritative as she was with her grandfather in other instances, in this alone her usual powers of persuasion utterly failed. Whether infected by old Daniel's dislike, (and be it observed, an unfounded prejudice, that sort of prejudice for which he who entertains it does not pretend to account even to himself is unluckily not only one of the most contagious feelings in the world, but one of the most invincible:) whether Farmer Cobham were inoculated with old Daniel's hatred of Jesse, or had taken that very virulent disease the natural way, nothing could exceed the bitterness of the aversion which gradually grew up in his mind towards the poor lad.

That Venus liked him, and Phoebe liked him, added strength to the feeling. He would have been ashamed to confess himself jealous of their good-will towards such an object, and yet most certainly jealous he was. He did not drive him from his shelter in the Moors, because he had unwarily passed his word—his word, which, with yeomanly pride, John Cobham held sacred as his bond—to let him remain until he committed some offence; but, for this offence, both he and Daniel watched and waited with an impatience and irritability which contrasted strangely with the honourable self-restraint that withheld him from direct abuse of his power.

For a long time, Daniel and his master waited in vain. Jesse, whom they had entertained some vague hope of chasing away by angry looks and scornful words, had been so much accustomed all his life long to taunts and contumely, that it was a great while before he became conscious of their unkindness; and when at last it forced itself upon his attention, he shrank away crouching and cowering, and buried himself in the closest recesses of the coppice, until the footstep of the reviler had passed by. One look at his sweet little friend repaid him twenty-fold; and although farmer Cobham had really worked himself into believing that there was danger in allowing the beautiful child to approach poor Jesse, and had therefore on different pretexts forbidden her visits to the Moors, she did yet happen in her various walks to encounter that devoted adherent oftener than would be believed possible by any one who has not been led to remark, how often in this best of all possible worlds, an earnest and innocent wish does as it were fulfil itself.

At last, however, a wish of a very different nature came to pass. Daniel Thorpe detected Jesse in an actual offence against that fertile source of crime and misery, the game laws.

Thus the affair happened.

During many weeks, the neighbourhood had been infested by a gang of bold, sturdy pilferers, roving vagabonds, begging by day, stealing and poaching by night—who had committed such extensive devastations amongst the poultry and linen of the village, as well as the game in the preserves, that the whole population was upon the alert; and the lonely coppices of the Moors rendering that spot one peculiarly likely to attract the attention of the gang, old Daniel, reinforced by a stout lad as a sort of extra-guard, kept a most jealous watch over his territory.

Perambulating the outside of the wood one evening at sunset, he heard the cry of a hare; and climbing over the fence, had the unexpected pleasure of seeing our friend Jesse in the act of taking a leveret still alive from the wire. "So, so, master Jesse! thou be'st turned poacher, be'st thou?" ejaculated Daniel, with a malicious chuckle, seizing, at one fell grip, the hare and the lad.

"Miss Phoebe!" ejaculated Jesse, submitting himself to the old man's grasp, but struggling to retain the leveret; "Miss Phoebe!"

"Miss Phoebe, indeed!" responded Daniel; "she saved thee once, my lad, but thy time's come now. What do'st thee want of the leveret, mon? Do'st not thee know that 'tis part of the evidence against thee? Well, he may carry that whilst I carry the snare. Master'll be main glad to see un. He always suspected the chap. And for the matter of that so did I. Miss Phoebe, indeed! Come along, my mon, I warrant thou hast seen thy last o' Miss Phoebe. Come on wi' thee."

And Jesse was hurried as fast as Daniel's legs would carry him to the presence of Farmer Cobham.

On entering the house (not the old deserted homestead of the Moors, but the comfortable dwelling-house at Aberleigh) Jesse delivered the panting, trembling leveret to the first person he met, with no other explanation than might be comprised in the words, "Miss Phoebe!" and followed Daniel quietly to the hall.

"Poaching, was he? Taking the hare from the wire? And you saw him? You can swear to the fact?" quoth John Cobham, rubbing his hands with unusual glee. "Well, now we shall be fairly rid of the fellow! Take him to the Chequers for the night, Daniel, and get another man beside yourself to sit up with him. It's too late to disturb Sir Robert this evening. To-morrow morning we'll take him to the Hall. See that the constable's ready by nine o'clock. No doubt but Sir Robert will commit him to the county bridewell."

"Oh, grandpapa!" exclaimed Phoebe, darting into the room with the leveret in her arms, and catching the last words. "Oh, grandpapa! poor Jesse!"

"Miss Phoebe!" ejaculated the culprit

"Oh, grandfather, it's all my fault," continued Phoebe; "and if anybody is to go to prison, you ought to send me. I had been reading about Cowper's hares, and I wanted a young hare to tame: I took a fancy for one, and told poor Jesse! And to think of his going to prison for that!"

"And did you tell him to set a wire for the hare, Phoebe?"

"A wire! what does that mean?" said the bewildered child. "But I dare say," added she, upon Farmer Cobham's explaining the nature of the snare, "I dare say that the poachers set the wire, and that he only took up the hare for me, to please my foolish fancy! Oh, grandpapa! Poor Jesse!" and Phoebe cried as if her heart would break.

"God bless you, Miss Phoebe!" said Jesse.

"All this is nonsense!" exclaimed the unrelenting fanner. "Take the prisoner to the Chequers, Daniel, and get another man to keep you company in sitting up with him. Have as much strong beer as you like, and be sure to bring him and the constable here by nine o'clock to-morrow morning."

"Oh, grandfather, you'll be sorry for this! I did not think you had been so hard-hearted!" sobbed Phoebe. "You'll be very sorry for this."

"Yes, very sorry, that he will. God bless you, Miss Phoebe," said Jesse.

"What! does he threaten? Take him off, Daniel. And you, Phoebe, go to bed and compose yourself. Heaven bless you, my darling!" said the fond grandfather, smoothing her hair, as, the tears still chasing each other down her cheeks, she stood leaning against his knee. "Go to bed and to sleep, my precious! and you, Sally, bring me my pipe:" and wondering why the fulfilment of a strong desire should not make him happier, the honest farmer endeavoured to smoke away his cares.

In the meanwhile, old Daniel conducted Jesse to the Chequers, and having lodged him safely in an upper room, sought out "an ancient, trusty, drouthy crony," with whom he sate down to carouse in the same apartment with his prisoner. It was a dark, cold, windy, October night, and the two warders sate cosily by the fire, enjoying their gossip and their ale, while the unlucky delinquent placed himself pensively by the window. About midnight the two old men were startled by his flinging open the casement.

"Miss Phoebe! look! look!"

"What? where?" inquired Daniel.

"Miss Phoebe!" repeated the prisoner; and, looking in the direction to which Jesse pointed, they saw the flames bursting from Farmer Cob-ham's house.

In a very few seconds they had alarmed the family, and sprung forth in the direction of the fire; the prisoner accompanying them, unnoticed in the confusion.

"Luckily, master's always insured to the value of all he's worth, stock and goods," quoth the prudent Daniel.

"Miss Phoebe!" exclaimed Jesse: and even as he spoke he burst in the door, darted up the staircase, and returned with the trembling child in his arms, followed by aunt Dorothy and the frightened servants.

"Grandpapa! dear grandpapa! where is grandpapa? Will no one save my dear grand-papa?" cried Phoebe.

And placing the little girl at the side of her aunt, Jesse again mounted the blazing staircase. For a few moments all gave him up for lost But he returned, tottering under the weight of a man scarcely yet aroused from heavy sleep, and half suffocated by the smoke and flames.

"Miss Phoebe! he's safe, Miss Phoebe!—Down, Venus, down—He's safe, Miss Phoebe! And now, I sha'n't mind going to prison, 'cause when I come back you'll be living at the *Moors*. Sha'n't you, Miss Phoebe? And I shall see you every day!"

One part of this speech turned out true and another part false—no uncommon fate, by the way, of prophetic speeches, even when uttered by wiser persons than poor Jesse. Phoebe did come to live at the Moors, and he did not go to prison.

On the contrary, so violent was the revulsion of feeling in the honest hearts of the good yeoman, John Cobham, and his faithful servant, old Daniel, and so deep the remorse which they both felt for their injustice and unkindness towards the friendless lad, that there was considerable danger of their falling into the opposite extreme, and ruining him by sudden and excessive indulgence. Jesse, however, was not of a temperament to be easily spoilt. He had been so long an outcast from human society that he had become as wild and shy as his old companions of the fields and the coppice, the beasts of the earth and the birds of the

air. The hare which he had himself given to Phoebe was easier to tame than Jesse Cliffe.

Gradually, very gradually, under the gentle influence of the gentle child, this great feat was accomplished, almost as effectually, although by no means so suddenly, as in the well-known case of Cymon and Iphigenia, the most noted precedent upon record of the process of reaching the head through the heart. Venus, and a beautiful Welsh pony called Taffy, which her grandfather had recently purchased for her riding, had their share in the good deed; these two favourites being placed by Phoebe's desire under Jesse's sole charge and management; a measure which not only brought him necessarily into something like intercourse with the other lads about the yard, but ended in his conceiving so strong an attachment to the animals of whom he had the care, that before the winter set in he had deserted his old lair in the wood, and actually passed his nights in a vacant stall of the small stable appropriated to their use.

From the moment that John Cobham detected such an approach to the habits of civilised life as sleeping under a roof, he looked upon the wild son of the Moors as virtually reclaimed, and so it proved. Every day he became more and more like his fellow-men. He abandoned his primitive oven, and bought his bread at the baker's. He accepted thankfully the decent clothing necessary to his attending Miss Phoebe in her rides round the country. He worked regularly and steadily at whatever labour was assigned to him, receiving wages like the other farm servants; and finally it was discovered that one of the first uses he made of these wages was to purchase spelling-books and copy-books, and enter himself at an evening school, where the opening difficulties being surmounted, his progress astonished every body.

His chief fancy was for gardening. The love, and, to a certain point, the knowledge of flowers which he had always evinced increased upon him every day;—and happening to accompany Phoebe on one of her visits to the young ladies at the Hall, who were much attached to the lovely little girl, he saw Lady Mordaunt's French garden, and imitated it the next year for his young mistress in wild flowers, after such a fashion as to excite the wonder and admiration of all beholders.

From that moment Jesse's destiny was decided. Sir Robert's gardener, a clever Scotchman, took great notice of him and offered to employ him at the Hall; but the Moors had to poor Jesse a fascination which he could not surmount. He felt that it would be easier to tear himself from the place altogether, than to live in the neighbourhood and not there. Accordingly he lingered on for a year or two, and then took a grateful leave of his benefactors, and set forth to London with the avowed intention of seeking employment in a great nursery-ground, to the proprietor of which he was furnished with letters, not merely from his friend the gardener, but from Sir Robert himself.

*N. B. It is recorded that on the night of Jesse's departure, Venus refused her supper and Phoebe cried herself to sleep.*

Time wore on. Occasional tidings had reached the Moors of the prosperous fortunes of the adventurer. He had been immediately engaged by the great nurseryman to whom he was recommended, and so highly approved, that in little more than two years he became foreman of the flower department; another two years saw him chief manager of the garden; and now, at the end of a somewhat longer period, there was a rumour of his having been taken into the concern as acting partner; a rumour which received full confirmation in a letter from himself, accompanying a magnificent present of shrubs, plants, and flower-roots, amongst which were two Dahlias, ticketed 'the Moors' and 'the Phoebe,' and announcing his intention of visiting his best and earliest friends in the course of the ensuing summer.

Still time wore on. It was full six months after this intimation, that on a bright morning in October, John Cobham, with two or three visitors from Belford, and his granddaughter Phoebe, now a lovely young woman, were coursing on the Moors. The townspeople had boasted of their greyhounds, and the old sportsman was in high spirits from having beaten them out of the field.

"If that's your best dog," quoth John, "why, I'll be bound that our Snowball would beat him with one of his legs tied up. Talk of running such a cur as that against Snowball! Why there's Phoebe's pet Venus, Snowball's great grandam, who was twelve years old last May, and has not seen a hare these three seasons, shall give him the go-by in the first hundred yards. Go and fetch Venus, Daniel! It will do her heart good to see a hare again," added he, answering the looks rather than the words of his granddaughter, for she had not spoken, "and I'll be bound to say she'll beat him out of sight He won't come in for a turn."

Upon Venus's arrival, great admiration was expressed at her symmetry and beauty; the grayness incident to her age having fallen upon her, as it sometimes does upon black greyhounds, in the form of small white spots, so that she appeared as if originally what the coursers call "ticked." She was in excellent condition, and appeared to understand the design of the meeting as well as any one present, and to be delighted to find herself once more in the field of fame. Her competitor, a yellow dog called Smoaker, was let loose, and the whole party awaited in eager expectation of a hare.

"Soho!" cried John Cobham, and off the dogs sprang; Venus taking the turn, as he had foretold, running as true as in her first season, doing all the work, and killing the hare, after a course which, for any part Smoaker took in it, might as well have been single-handed.

"Look how she's bringing the hare to my grandfather!" exclaimed Phoebe; "she always brings her game!"

And with the hare in her mouth, carefully poised by the middle of the back, she was slowly advancing towards her master, when a stranger, well dressed and well mounted, who had joined the party unperceived during the course, suddenly called "Venus!"

And Venus started, pricked up her ears as if to listen, and stood stock still.

"Venus!" again cried the horseman.

And Venus, apparently recognising the voice, walked towards the stranger, (who by this time had dismounted,) laid the hare down at his feet, and then sprang up herself to meet and return his caresses.

"Jesse! It must be Jesse Cliffe!" said Phoebe, in a tone which wavered between exclamation and interrogatory.

"It can be none other," responded her grandfather. "I'd trust Venus beyond all the world in the matter of recognising an old friend, and we all know that except her old master and her young mistress, she never



cared a straw for anybody but Jesse. It must be Jesse Cliffe, though to be sure he's so altered that how the bitch could find him out, is beyond my comprehension. It's remarkable," continued he in an under tone, walking away with Jesse from the Belford party, "that we five (counting Venus and old Daniel) should meet just on this very spot—isn't it? It looks as if we were to come together. And if you have a fancy for Phoebe, as your friend Sir Robert says you have, and if Phoebe retains her old fancy for you, (as I partly believe maybe the case,) why my consent sha'nt be wanting. Don't keep squeezing my hand, man, but go and find out what she thinks of the matter."

Five minutes after this conversation Jesse and Phoebe were walking together towards the house: what he said we have no business to inquire, but if blushes may be trusted, of a certainty the little damsel did not answer "No."

\*\*\* END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK JESSE CLIFFE \*\*\*

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