

INTRODUCTORY.

COWPER'S LIFE.

The interest which attaches to Cowper, by virtue of his natural disposition, his character, and the misfortunes of his life, is so much greater than that which his poetry, judged by itself and for itself, can possibly arouse, that it is difficult to pass any opinion upon him as a poet, without being swayed by feelings of sympathy with him as a man. And the more so is this true, in that, having in his writings with perfect unconsciousness wholly revealed his inmost self, he stands to all that have read them for an intimate and beloved friend. On the other hand, it is equally difficult (if it be not impossible) adequately to appreciate Cowper's poetry (especially if one reads only a small portion of it) without knowing something of the story of his life.*

William Cowper was born in Berkhamstead, in Herts, November 26th, 1731. His father and mother were both of gentle birth—the one being descended from a long line of baronets and squires, and the other able to boast, if need were, of royal blood in her veins. Many of the poet's contemporary relatives occupied positions of trust and importance, and his associations all through life were with the higher social classes. His father was a clergyman, the Rector of Berkhamstead, and was Chaplain to the King. Of the father's influence upon the son, there is little account or evidence; but of the influence of his mother (who was a Donne, and of the same family as the celebrated poet) he speaks even to his latest days with the utmost tenderness and affection. Unfortunately for him, she died when her son was only six years of age. Fifty-three years later, a cousin having sent him a portrait of her, Cowper, in acknowledging the gift, wrote:—"I can truly say that not a week passes (perhaps I might with equal veracity say a day) in which I do not think of her." This gift was the occasion of the beautiful lines, *On Receipt of My Mother's Picture*, justly considered as one of the most affecting elegies in the English language.

* It will be impossible here to give more than the barest outline of the poet's life. I would therefore recommend the student to put himself in possession of two books, feeling sure that if he adds them to his library at this time he will never regret doing so:—GOLDWIN SMITH'S *Cowper*, in the English Men of Letters Series, and the *Globe Edition of Cowper's Poetical Works*, edited by the REV. WILLIAM BENHAM. This *Globe Edition* has an excellent Biographical Introduction, setting forth several important facts of the poet's life never before given to the world; it contains, also, several poems not previously published; and its text has been most carefully prepared; altogether it is probable that for a long time to come it will be considered the standard edition of Cowper's poetical writings. Both books may be had for a comparatively low sum. The cheap edition of *Cowper's Letters*, published by the Religious Tract Society, will also repay purchase and perusal.