

place from a relation in the government of the day, who duly nominated him to the position of Clerk to the Journals of the House of Lords. His friend's right of nomination was challenged and it became necessary for Cowper to prepare for a public examination in the House in order to demonstrate his fitness for the position. The sensitive nature of Cowper shrank from the test, and in a fit of dejection he attempted to commit suicide in order to escape it. It was of course an impossibility for him to retain office after this occurrence, and he was for some time in a deplorable state of mind, and his melancholy assumed the form of a religious monomania, in which his most prominent idea was that he had committed the unpardonable sin.

He renounced London for ever, and at first resided at St. Albans where some improvement in his mental condition took place. He left this place for Huntingdon where he became acquainted with the Unwins with whom he ever afterwards lived. He resided next for nineteen years at Olney and lastly at Weston where he died the 25th of April, in the year 1800. Towards the close of his life the Government settled upon him an annual pension of £300 as a reward for his literary services. The last years of his life were years of gloom. Chief among the friends who at various periods sought to soothe the unfortunate poet in his sad affliction were not only the Unwins but also the Rev. John Newton of Olney, Lady Austen, and his cousin Lady Hesketh.

*His Works.*—Cowper did not come before the world as an author till he had completed his fiftieth year. In little more than a quarter of a year from the time that he began he had finished the poems entitled *Table Talk*, *The Progress of Error*, *Truth*, *Expostulation*. To his acquaintance with Lady Austen, who related to him the story,

the world is indebted for the ballad of *John Gilpin*, and also for the idea of *The Task*. Fearing that *The Task* would not make a sufficiently large volume for the booksellers he added to it his poem *Tirocinium* or a Review of Schools. A few weeks after finishing *The Task* he began in 1784 his translation of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. He next undertook to edit a new edition of Milton's works but he never enjoyed sufficient composure of mind to carry out this undertaking. He is also known as the author of many popular hymns which strengthen in no small degree his claim to be considered as the Christian Poet.

*The Task.*—In the preface to *The Task*, Cowper gives its history as follows:—"A lady fond of blank verse demanded a poem of that kind from the author, and gave him the Sofa for a subject. He obeyed; and having much leisure, connected another subject with it, and pursuing the train of thought to which his situation and turn of mind led him, brought forth at length, instead of the trifle which he at first intended, a serious affair—a volume."

In a letter to Mr. Unwin, in 1784, Cowper explains at some length the object he had in view while writing *The Task*.

"What there is of a religious cast, I have thrown towards the end for two reasons; first, that I might not revolt the reader at his entrance, and secondly, that my best impressions might be made last. Were I to write as many poems as Lope de Vega or Voltaire, not one of them would be without this tincture. If the world like it not, so much the worse for them. I make all the concessions I can that I may please them, but I will not please them at the expense of conscience. My descriptions are all from nature; not one of them second-handed. My delineations of the heart are from my own experience; not one of them borrowed from books,