

# PLEASANT HOURS

A PAPER FOR OUR YOUNG FOLK.

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BERKHAMSTEAD RECTORY.

## COWPER.

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What an honourable record have the sons of ministers! The popular prejudice against them as useless incumbents on society has recently had a vigorous refutation in the facts presented by De Candolle, a French scientist and sceptic, who gleans from biography a most striking and significant list of sons of pastors eminent in scholarship and literature. Agassiz, Encke, Linnaeus, Hallam, Hobbes, Emerson, Whately, Robert Hall, Lightfoot, the Wesleys, Lowth, Stillingfleet, the Beechers, Spurgeon, Dugald Stewart, Cudworth, Reid, Bancroft, Kingsley, Young, Thomson, Coleridge, Montgomery, Heber, Tennyson, and Lowell, are samples justifying the assertion that "the sons of clerical families have actually surpassed, during two hundred years, in their contributions to the roll of eminent scientists and literati the similar contributions of any other class of families."

To this long list must be added the name of William Cowper, the son of the Rev. John Cowper, D.D., chaplain to George II., and rector of Berkhamstead, Hertfordshire, where William was born, November 15th, 1731 (O.S.) On both the father's and mother's side he was of noble descent—a circumstance which is no guarantee for moral character, but which still carries with it a presumption of the benefits of wealth and refinement. His mother, who was a Donne and a lineal descendant of Henry III., died in his sixth year. The bitter grief of his young heart he subsequently depicted in a poem in memory of his mother:

"Thy maidens, grieved themselves at my concern,  
Oft gave me promise of thy quick return.  
What ardently I wished, I long believed,  
And disappointed still, was still deceived;  
By expectation every day beguiled,  
Dupe of to-morrow even from a child.



THE LODGE, WESTON.

Thus many a sad to-morrow came and went  
Till, all my stock of infant sorrows spent,  
I learned at last submission to my lot,  
But, though I less deplored thee, ne'er forgot."

From a motherless home to a still more cheerless position the child was soon sent, and the "little mass of timid and quivering sensibility" found himself amidst the bullying and cruel tyranny of the strong boys of a boarding-school. From this, after an interval of two years spent under the care of an oculist, he was sent to the hardly more congenial associations of Westminster school, where classics and cricket furnish the chief goals for the emulation and ambition of the pupils. The training thus given is to the average Englishman elevating and salutary, developing both mind and muscle, imparting both classic culture and chivalrous vigour. But to young Cowper, with his timidity and shrinking nervousness, there is no doubt these school-day associations brought those shocks and boyish trouble which permanently injured his mind, and to

fulness and hopefulness the best solace to a disordered mind. This harmonizes with the testimony of Dr. Workman when Superintendent of the Insane Asylum, Toronto, and with statistics showing that Methodism has proportionately fewer representatives among the insane than any other church. Its tone of Christian cheerfulness, associated with temperance and purity of life, is the best safeguard against mental derangement. When Cowper is spoken of as a Methodist, it is to be understood only that he was in full sympathy as an Anglican with the Wesleyan revival then in progress within the Established Church.

Labouring under his hypochondria, Cowper

### BECAME AN INMATE OF A MAD-HOUSE

at St. Alban's, under the control of Dr. Cotton, who was a man of active and cheerful piety. At the expiration of eighteen months, giving his Bible and its promises, which he had sadly concluded were not for him, Cowper found peace and light for his disordered mind.

After his release from the asylum his brother John secured lodgings for him at Huntingdon, where he was welcomed



COWPER

which the tender child from Berkhamstead Rectory was by no means equal.

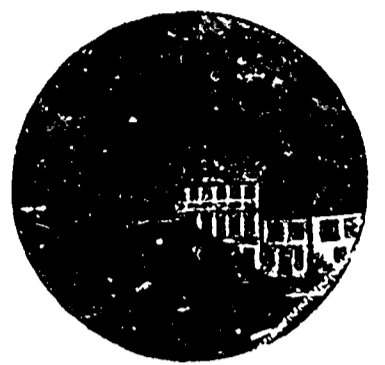
### AT THE AGE OF EIGHTEEN

Cowper was articled with Mr. Chapman, an attorney in London. At the expiration of his three years' term he took chambers in the Middle and afterwards in the Inner Temple, and at length was duly called to the Bar. He entered upon the study and practice of law by the earnest desire of his father. However, his preferences were decidedly for literature, and from this time forward he is to be found engaged chiefly in literary work.

In 1756 Cowper's father died. With limited means, and with the law as a mere nominal profession, the despondency which overshadowed him increased. Major Cowper, a relative, secured for him an offer of the position of Clerk of the Journals of the House of Lords; but the labours of the office and his timidity at appearing at the bar of the House, led him to abandon the position. At the age of thirty-two, in the year 1763, he went mad and attempted to commit suicide. Having become a Methodist his hypochondria took a religious form. Says Goldwin Smith: "A votary of wealth, when his brain gives way under disease or age, fancies that he is a beggar. A Methodist, when his brain gives way under the same influences, fancies that he is forsaken of God." This author, however, freely admits that the same Methodism which gives this form to hypochondria also brings by its cheer-

to the heart and home of the Unwins, the Rev. William Unwin, the rector, being known as decidedly Methodist, and Mrs. Unwin becoming the life-long friend of Cowper. Daily life in the rectory at Huntingdon is described by Cowper as composed of a little amusement, at least four miles of walking, two hours of private reading of Scripture, two services in the church, "commonly the evening is finished either with hymns or a sermon, and last of all the family are called to prayers." Cowper adds, "I need not tell you that such a life as this is consistent with the utmost cheerfulness,"—a statement about which the ungodly, and perhaps some others, will be sceptical.

About two years subsequently Mr. Unwin was killed by falling from a horse. An indissoluble bond of friendship had been established between Cowper and Mrs. Unwin, of whom he spoke as his mother, and from henceforth they were to be associated in friendship till parted by death. Together they moved to Olney, on the Ouse, in Buckinghamshire. If Cowper was melancholy this place, one would think, would drive him to despair. The fact is, however, that here were the highest aspirations of his poetical genius and of his lofty spirit. Neither the dullness of the people nor of the place hindered his upward flights. The choice of this peculiar place is to be accounted for by the fascinating attraction of the evangelical curate, the Rev. John Newton, who has enriched our Canadian hymn-book with six beau-



OLNEY

tiful hymns, including the universal favourite,

"How sweet 'the name of Jesus sounds'"

At Olney, under Newton's direction, Mrs. Unwin and Cowper were quite active in holding prayer-meetings and helping the poor for both worlds. But the dark cloud of despair was again gathering, and amidst the gloom Cowper again imagined himself forsaken of God, and moreover entertained the inconvenient caprice that he must reside nowhere but in the vicarage where, under the care of Dr. Cotton, he was restored to sanity.

After a residence of over

### TWENTY YEARS AT OLNEY

In the year 1759, the poet and Mrs. Unwin removed to the village of Weston, a short distance from Olney, where Mrs. Unwin became pained. This led to their removal to Norfolk, and then to East Dereham, where she died in 1796. About three years subsequently, after an interval of sadness and darkness, Cowper died, April 25th, 1800, aged sixty-nine years.

Southey designates Cowper as "the most popular poet of his generation and the best of English letter-writers." His leading poems: "The Task," "Truth," "The Progress of Error," and "Conversation," have gained a recognized place in English classics. His mind was fruitful and his pen was ready in the production of short poems chastened by sorrow or sparkling with humorous sarcasm, while his "Olney Hymns" are represented in the psalmody of all the churches by the immortal ode:

"God moves in a mysterious way."

In analyzing the elements of Cowper's genius the average reader acquires the impression that the majority of his productions are the language of despair; but this is not correct. In fact, a comparatively small proportion of them are clouded with despondency. Instances of sprightly and humorous delineations of character are very numerous. His "John Gilpin" seems inspired by a



THE CHESTNUT AVENUE.