

COWPER IN THE TASK.

"Home is the resort of love, of joy, of peace and plenty; where supporting and supported, polished friends and dear relations mingle into bliss."



ALL the writers of the 18th century, we find few indeed, who claim our admiration in so great a degree as does the author of *The Task*.

When we consider the character of the age in which he lived, "An age of gilded sinfulness among the higher classes and of a sinfulness ungilded, but no less coarse among the lower classes," we cannot but feel thankful, that some, at least, were found, whose nobleness of character, whose purity of intention, and whose deep sympathy for their fellow-men, raised them above the degenerate habits which seemed to pervade the whole English nation.

It is very true that Dr. Johnson, by his stern integrity, and love of self-dependence left a deep and lasting impression on the moral tone of society, and by his letters to the Earl of Chesterfield, completely abolished the abominable system of patronage, which, during the last half of the 18th century was extended only to the most obscure and most unscrupulous supporters of a most corrupt administration, thus depriving honest and worthy men who would scorn to stoop to such baseness of the very means of subsistence.

Burke and Pitt, by their utter contempt for political corruption and party without principle, have, to a great degree, redeemed the character of the public men of those times.

But upon Cowper devolved the difficult task of raising poetry out of the mire and obscenity into which it had been plunged by writers whose sole object seemed to be to satisfy the desires of a people whose moral tastes were far from being worthy of commendation. Or, as it has been well said, Cowper came "to regenerate poetry, to christianize it, to elevate it, and to fill it again with feeling and with truth."

We should, in all our reading, earnestly and incessantly bear in mind that literature has been endowed with a power which necessarily renders it a moral agent, with a power which makes it capable of changing the character of mankind.

If, then, the poetry of a nation exercises as important an influence on the minds and hearts of its people, we cannot too highly estimate the great work done by Cowper, for there is no writer of any age, who has written more frequently or effectually against the follies and vices of his countrymen.

Leaving Westminster, as he, at a later date tells us, "totally depraved in principles and an adept in the infernal art of lying," he sought first to remodel his own life, that he might the more successfully aid in uprooting the false and unchristian doctrines, which bid fair to subvert religion, and to establish in its place the worship of reason. He, therefore, forsook his legal profession, which was but poorly suited to his taste, and devoted himself almost exclusively to the more congenial, but, perhaps, less remunerative study of literature.

His early productions, owing, no doubt, to the too gravely religious spirit in which they were conceived, met with such little favor from the reading public, that he, unconscious of his own powers, was about to give up in despair the object he had cherished so long, and which he had striven so hard to attain.

But roused from his despondency by the earnest solicitation of his friends, who knew better than he the great powers that lay dormant within his soul, he set to work assiduously, and in little more than a year, gave to the world his masterpiece, the *Task*.

This time, however, Cowper was clearly conscious of his own success, for, like Pope, he no longer courted the candor, but dared the judgment of his readers.

If, as Dr. Johnson asserts, genius "is that energy which collects, combines, amplifies and animates," then, to the author