

**CASSELL'S NATIONAL  
LIBRARY; THE TASK  
AND OTHER POEMS**

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Cassell's National Library; The Task and Other Poems by William Cowper

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**WILLIAM COWPER**

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CASELL'S NATIONAL LIBRARY.

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THE TASK,

AND OTHER POEMS.

BY

WILLIAM COWPER.



CASELL & COMPANY, LIMITED.

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1891.

## INTRODUCTION.

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AFTER the publication of his "Table Talk" and other poems in March, 1783, William Cowper, in his quiet retirement at Olney, under Mrs. Unwin's care, found a new friend in Lady Austen. She was a baronet's widow who had a sister married to a clergyman near Olney, with whom Cowper was slightly acquainted. In the summer of 1781, when his first volume was being printed, Cowper met Lady Austen and her sister in the street at Olney, and persuaded Mrs. Unwin to invite them to tea. Their coming was the beginning of a cordial friendship. Lady Austen, without being less earnest, had a liveliness that satisfied Cowper's sense of fun to an extent that stirred at last some jealousy in Mrs. Unwin. "She had lived much in France," Cowper said, "was very sensible, and had infinite vivacity."

The Vicar of Olney was in difficulties, with his affairs in the hands of trustees. The duties of his office were entirely discharged by a curate, and the vicarage was to let. Lady Austen, in 1782, rented it, to be near her new friends. There was only a wall between the garden of the house occupied by Cowper and Mrs. Unwin and the vicarage garden. A door was made in the wall, and there was a close companionship of three. When Lady Austen did not spend her evenings with Mrs. Unwin and Cowper, Mrs. Unwin and Cowper spent their evenings with Lady Austen. They read, talked, Lady Austen played and sang, and they all called one another by their Christian names, William,

Mary (Mrs. Unwin), and Anna (Lady Austen). In a poetical epistle to Lady Austen, written in December, 1781, Cowper closes a reference to the strength of their friendship with the evidence it gave,—

“ That Solomon has wisely spoken,—  
‘ A threefold cord is not soon broken.’ ”

One evening in the summer of 1782, when Cowper was low-spirited, Lady Austen told him in lively fashion the story upon which he founded the ballad of “John Gilpin.” Its original hero is said to have been a Mr. Bayer, who had a draper’s shop in London, at the corner of Cheapside. Cowper was so much tickled by it, that he lay awake part of the night rhyming and laughing, and by the next evening the ballad was complete. It was sent to Mrs. Unwin’s son, who sent it to the *Public Advertiser*, where for the next two or three years it lay buried in the “Poets’ Corner,” and attracted no particular attention.

In the summer of 1783, when one of the three friends had been reading blank verse aloud to the other two, Lady Austen, from her seat upon the sofa, urged upon Cowper, as she had urged before, that blank verse was to be preferred to the rhymed couplets in which his first book had been written, and that he should write a poem in blank verse. “I will,” he said, “if you will give me a subject.” “Oh,” she answered, “you can write upon anything. Write on this sofa.” He playfully accepted that as “the task” set him, and began his poem called “The Task,” which was finished in the summer of the next year, 1784. But before “The Task” was finished, Mrs. Unwin’s jealousy obliged

Cowper to give up his new friend--whom he had made a point of calling upon every morning at eleven--and prevent her return to summer quarters in the vicarage.

Two miles from Olney was Weston Underwood with a park, to which its owner gave Cowper the use of a key. In 1782 a younger brother, John Throckmorton, came with his wife to live at Weston, and continued Cowper's privilege. The Throckmortons were Roman Catholics, but in May, 1784, Mr. Unwin was tempted by an invitation to see a balloon ascent from their park. Their kindness as hosts won upon Cowper; they sought and had his more intimate friendship, till in his correspondence he playfully abused the first syllable of their name and called them Mr. and Mrs. Frog.

Cowper's "Task" went to its publisher and printing was begun, when suddenly "John Gilpin," after a long sleep in the *Public Advertiser*, rode triumphant through the town. A favourite actor of the day was giving recitations at Freemason's Hall. A man of letters, Richard Sharp, who had read and liked "John Gilpin," pointed out to the actor how well it would suit his purpose. The actor was John Henderson, whose *Hamlet*, *Shylock*, *Richard III.*, and *Falstaff* were the most popular of his day. He died suddenly in 1785, at the age of thirty-eight, and it was thus in the last year of his life that his power of recitation drew "John Gilpin" from obscurity and made it the nine days' wonder of the town. Pictures of John Gilpin abounded in all forms. He figured on pocket-handkerchiefs. When the publisher asked for a few more pages to his volume of "The Task," Cowper gave him as mskeweights an "Epistle to Joseph Hill," his



"Tirocinium," and, a little doubtfully, "John Gilpin." So the book was published in June, 1785; was sought by many because it was by the author of "John Gilpin," and at once won recognition. The preceding volume had not made Cowper famous. "The Task" at once gave him his place among the poets.

Cowper's "Task" is to this day, except Wordsworth's "Excursion," the best purely didactic poem in the English language. The "Sofa" stands only as a point of departure:—it suits a gouty limb; but as the poet is not gouty, he is up and off. He is off for a walk with Mrs. Unwin in the country about Olney. He dwells on the rural sights and rural sounds, taking first the inanimate sounds, then the animate. In muddy winter weather he walks alone, finds a solitary cottage, and draws from it comment upon the false sentiment of solitude. He describes the walk to the park at Weston Underwood, the prospect from the hilltop, touches upon his privilege in having a key of the gate, describes the avenues of trees, the wilderness, the grove, and the sound of the thresher's flail then suggests to him that all live by energy, best ease is after toil. He compares the luxury of art with wholesomeness of Nature free to all, that brings health to the sick, joy to the returned seafarer. Spleen vexes votaries of artificial life. True gaiety is for the innocent. So thought flows on, and touches in its course the vital questions of a troubled time. The "Task" appeared four years before the outbreak of the French Revolution, and is in many passages not less significant of rising storms than the "Excursion" is significant of what came with the breaking of the clouds.

H. M.

# THE TASK.

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## BOOK I.

### THE SOFA.

[“The history of the following production is briefly this:—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.]

I SING the Sofa. I, who lately sang  
Truth, Hope, and Charity, and touched with awe  
The solemn chords, and with a trembling hand,  
Escaped with pain from that advent'rous flight,  
Now seek repose upon a humbler theme:  
The theme though humble, yet august and proud  
The occasion—for the Fair commands the song.

Time was, when clothing sumptuous or for use,  
Save their own painted skins, our sires had none.  
As yet black breeches were not; satin smooth,  
Or velvet soft, or plush with shaggy pile:  
The hardy chief upon the rugged rock  
Washed by the sea, or on the gravelly bank

Thrown up by wintry torrents roaring loud,  
Fearless of wrong, reposed his weary strength.  
Those barbarous ages past, succeeded next  
The birthday of invention; weak at first,  
Dull in design, and clumsy to perform.  
Joint-stools were then created; on three legs  
Upborne they stood. Three legs upholding firm  
A massy slab, in fashion square or round.  
On such a stool immortal Alfred sat,  
And swayed the sceptre of his infant realms;  
And such in ancient halls and mansions drear  
May still be seen, but perforated sore  
And drilled in holes the solid oak is found,  
By worms voracious eating through and through.

At length a generation more refined  
Improved the simple plan, made three legs four,  
Gave them a twisted form vermicular, ~~as the~~  
And o'er the seat, with plenteous wadding stuffed,  
Induced a splendid cover green and blue,  
Yellow and red, of tapestry richly wrought  
And woven close, or needlework sublime.  
There might ye see the peony spread wide,  
The full-blown rose, the shepherd and his lass,  
Lapdog and lambkin with black staring eyes,  
And parrots with twin cherries in their beak.

Now came the cane from India, smooth and bright  
With Nature's varnish; severed into stripes  
That interlaced each other, these supplied,  
Of texture firm, a lattice-work that braced  
The new machine, and it became a chair.