SELECTIONS FROM COWPER'S POEMS

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WILLIAM COWPER

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OWPER'S POEMS

WITH INTRODUCTION BY

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PREFACE.

THE fame of Cowper, like that of every other poet worthy to be reckoned among the foremost names of literature, has gone through various vicissitudes. The ups and downs of changing taste are indeed the tests of real reputation; and it is only the names that re-emerge, with lustre changed, perhaps, but scarcely dimmed, from the cold shades of neglect and forgetfulness, that are worthy to be inscribed on the national roll as a lasting glory and honour to the language. There are many who enjoy a very agreeable reputation in their own day to whom this ordeal is fatal, and there are few things at once more humbling and more comical than the juxtaposition of names which now and then a critical generation will make, to its own confusion. Thus Shenstone and even Rowe have been in their day coupled with Shakespeare; and Dante was once considered a rude and barbarous rhymster in the sublime presence of Lorenzo dei Medici. Cowper, who has no such rank, has, however, suffered like his greater brethren by the changes of popular feeling, and has gone out of fashion all the more completely for the temporary causes which at his outset added to his fame. There are almost always some adventitious circumstances to increase the due weight of poetic merit with the poet's contemporaries. The mere fact that they are contemporaries gives his generation an interest in him, besides the more true effect of a mind fashioned by the same influences, and probably moving in a line of thought harmonious with

their own. In this there is nothing that detracts from the common interest of mankind, but rather a charm and attraction additional, an individuality which gives character to the general. Shakespeare is true Elizabethan but he is still truer man; and the large and noble atmosphere of a magnificent age adds something to, but never impairs, the humanity which we all share. Even Pope, the exponent of so much less heroic a period, loses but little from the fact that his ways of thinking and the very air he breathes are different from ours. And when the adventitious circumstances which enhance the poetry at its first bursting forth are personal, as in such a case as Byron's, the passing away of their temporary influence takes nothing from the true merit upon which every final verdict has to be founded. If we are not carried away by enthusiasm for the beautiful young peer and hero, we can still understand the state of mind of those who were so, and, though unimpressed ourselves, can comprehend sympathetically how his first readers were impressed. But Cowper is under the action of a different class of influences. The temporary advantage which enhanced his work to his generation was neither that of personal attractiveness nor of general harmony with his age. He represented, indeed, and afforded utterance to a large party in his age, binding willing fetters upon his gentle genius to make himself more and more its spokesman and exponent. His hope and ambition was to be the poet of religion—and that not of religion in the broadest sense, not of divine Christianity in its largeness and fulness, but of the special form of religion which a special revival of interest in sacred subjects at a moment of much profanity and vice had called forth. The faith, not even of Calvin, but of John Newton, represented Christianity to Cowper's eyes. He knew no kind of piety but that which was dictated by this form of doctrine, and he tutored himself to be its interpreter to the world which loved verse better than sermons. Immediately he had his reward; he was admitted not only by the lovers of poetry into the sacred

circle of the poets; but he was warmly hailed and adopted by the myriads who know nothing about literature, yet love above all things to have their own sentiments uttered for them in the language of verse. When it occurs to poetry to be placed beside his Bible by the devout reader's bed-side, it has reached a height at which no critical standards have any sway. The writers who attain this eminence are seldom great; they are usually devout hymnsters, authors of verses real enough to strike a responsive note in pious hearts, though without any value in art. But when by chance a true poet reaches this position, his fame, for the moment at least, is beyond measure. Keble, in our own generation, has reached it by the strength of an inspiration which is the same in its source but entirely different in its manifestation from that of Cowper; and what poet has reached so suddenly and easily anything like the universal popularity of the *Christian Year?*

This, however, which adds so immensely to immediate appreciation, is bad for the future. Keble may not suffer; he is so much less than Cowper in intrinsic merit, that if he loses this standing ground, no other will be left of appreciable magnitude, and he must go altogether if he fails at all; but at the same time he is far safer than Cowper, insomuch as his is the romance of religion, with many picturesque elements in it, of Gothic architecture, and fine music, and beautiful ritual, besides its all-pervading devotion. Even were the faith of the Evangelical party to return again, as perhaps, after the long reign of free-thinking and over-liberality, it may do, the pious sentiment of Keble would still keep him afloat. But Cowper has little chance of gaining toleration either from the High Church or the indifferent world. For his religiousness is of a far more rigid kind. Though he can see, none better, the love of God in the smile of nature, and point out the innocent homage of creation to its Maker, yet he cannot permit us to join in that homage without a distinct profession of faith. He will allow no general statements, no vague

hopes, but will drive us to account for our belief before he will allow that we have any chance at all. He and his fellow-believers were in the position of being very sure of every tenet they held. Doubt to them was sin, to be sternly crushed upon the threshold of the mind, not gently encouraged and applauded as an almost virtue. The fires of hell blazed to them upon the very confines of this world, only to be escaped by a flight which, if not accomplished to-day, it might be too late to make to-morrow. The "fountain filled with blood drawn from Emmanuel's veins," which horrifies us now as with an image at once disgusting and profane, was to them a reverent and loving description of the chief object of faith. It is impossible to imagine a more complete change of phraseology and sentiment than that which has passed over even the section of the Church most near in its views to those entertained by Cowper. Everything has been relaxed, doctrine and statement, and the requirements of orthodoxy, and the practice of the devout. Those who are the very descendants of his teachers and leaders pass with a shudder over his denunciations, or explain them away on the ground of insanity and a mind unhinged. But there was no insanity in Cowper's doctrine, though in his personal application of it there might be much. Whitfield had preached the same; Newton enforced it in a world of fiery sermons; and Wilberforce reasoned with the world over it, with a logic that thousands found irresistible. It was the utterance of the highest religious earnestness of the time. We are not so earnest in anything nowadays as they were in their determination not to bate a word, not to soften a threat, to warn every man that his soul was forfeit, and that we must not lose a moment in fleeing from the wrath to come. We have lost much of the earnestness, perhaps something of the religion, in our tendency to soften every possible expression, and admit every gentler interpretation, and make the best of our case instead of the worst, as they thought it necessary to do.

It is this extraordinary change in the tone of religious thought which more than anything else has set Cowper at a disadvantage. Those descriptions of nature in which nobody has surpassed the gentle poet of Olney, and those delightful domestic scenes in which nobody has equalled him, can never cease to charm the candid reader. There is an absolute truth in these pictures, a daring adherence to what he sees, in which the timid poet shows an independence and boldness unknown not only in his own day, but even in the after-age, which, moulded unconsciously by his example, and by the breach of tradition which he accomplished, made plainness of language into a system, and threw off ostentatiously the bonds which poetry has always worn, the more exalted diction, the choice of high effects and avoidance of the ordinary which has been with her an article of faith. This faith Cowper abandoned even more entirely than his successor Wordsworth, who formulated the rebellion. Most people have forgotten, and Wordsworth altogether ignored, this precedent, partly in his intense and narrow vision remaining unconscious of his predecessor, his eyes being so closely fixed upon his own theory and so convinced of its originality that he was scarcely cognisant of what had been done before him. But Cowper's self-emancipation from the ornate words of ancient use and wont and the more elevated themes supposed to be essential to poetry was more complete even than Wordsworth's. He had no notion that his system was a new one, nor purpose of establishing a changed rule in the canons of poetry. Indeed his own poetic successes and fame have an accidental character altogether, as things which were never calculated upon in his own conception of his life, but stumbled into unawares in his endeavours to escape from the enemies of his peace. In this attempt he was not responsible to any critical tribunal, nor did he occupy his attention with any precedent. To keep his particular demons at bay, to fill up the languid hours of an idle life, was the declared motive of his great

poem, *The Task*; and as it is chiefly upon this poem that his position as an original power in poetry is founded, we may confine our observations to that remarkable work. His position in it is quite individual and peculiar. It may be worth the reader's while to contrast it with that of Gray who went before him and Wordsworth who came after him.

There never was a more exquisite evening landscape than that which Gray has painted for us, in the dim and pensive tints that become the hour. The twilight painters who have now grown to a school, the English Mason, the French Corot, and so many more, have nothing that is equal to the soft waning of the light, the balmy dimness, the falling dews and shadows, the faint sounds of "parting day"—in this wonderful picture. True in every half tint to the hour and the scene, it is yet so suffused with the atmosphere of imagination and poetry that we might be content to choose it as a symbol of the indescribable and infinite difference between mere prose fact and poetical truth. It embodies not only the scene but the sentiment—the wistfulness, the sadness, the regret, which are the natural accompaniments in the heart of the end of day. It is sometimes supposed that it owes half its popularity to its subject, and Gray himself is reported, in a kind of anger with his own fame, to have said so—foolishly, we think; as well resent the delight with which we look upon the work of a great painter, because, if he has done nobly, it is Nature we think of first and not the hand that has rendered her. It is very unlikely indeed that the ordinary observer placed in a country churchyard at the close of a summer day would think of the buried capabilities under these swellings of the turf. He would think of the wicked who cease from troubling and the weary who are at rest, and perhaps, if his soul was touched with tender association, with some thrill of awe and self-reflection, would remember that the "poor inhabitants below" had once been as himself, and that he too by and by would be as they. But to the poet there