THE ESSAYS. WITH LIFE BY THE EDITOR. NOTES, AND ILLUS. BY DR. HURD, AND OTHERS

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ABRAHAM COWLEY

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THE ESSAYS OF

ABRAHAM COWLEY.

WITH LIFE BY THE EDITOR.

NOTES, AND ILLUSTRATIONS BY DR. HURD, AND OTHERS.

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CONTENTS.

ESSAY, INTRODUCTORY AND BIOGRAPHICAL.

WHEN Abraham Cowley was buried in Westminster Abbey, near Chaucer and Spenser, King Charles II. pronounced oracularly, "That Mr. Cowley had not left behind him a better man in England." The posthumous praise of princes is, we must remember, one way of paying their debts; and as Cowley had acted as secretary to either Charles, and had been so trusted that he wrote much of their correspondence in cypher, and was rewarded slenderly, if at all, we may believe that with the king such excessive praise was natural. This was in 1667; and Cowley had died at the Porch House in Chertsey, in the forty-ninth year of his age, leaving behind him, as we know, both better men and better poets.

It is in writing his life that Doctor Johnson complains of the penury of English biography, and does, one must confess, very little to enrich it. He tells us that "Cowley's father was a grocer, whose condition Dr. Sprat conceals under the general appellation of a

citizen:" from the omission of his name in St. Dunstan's register, it was supposed that this citizen father was a sectary. Whatever he was, he died before his celebrated son was born; and it is to his mother, who lived to a great age, and rejoiced in her son's fame, that Cowley owed his education and position. In that mother's window lay a volume of Spenser, and reading this he became "irrecoverably a poet," as he himself relates. He was admitted into Westminster School, hated grammar, so that he never mastered or retained its ordinary rules; wrote "The Tragical History of Pyramus and Thisbe," when he was ten years old, and another poem when he was twelve. While yet at school he produced a comedy, "Love's Riddle," but these "learned puerilities," says the Doctor, "added little to the wonders of Cowley's minority."

In 1636, Cowley went to Cambridge, wrote part of the "Davideis," and a Latin play, the "Naufragium Joculare;" and, as Prince Charles, at the beginning of the Civil War, passed through Cambridge on his way to York, he was entertained by the comedy of the "Guardian," "rough-drawn" by Cowley, and repeated by the students. The attention or even the attendance of the prince was enough to make the young poet a royalist, and in 1643, he, being then a Master of Arts, was, by the prevalence of the Parliament, ejected from Cambridge, and soon after followed the queen to Paris, where he became secretary to Lord Jermyn, and was employed "in cyphering and deciphering the letters that passed between the king and queen, an employment of

the highest confidence and honour. So wide was his province of intelligence," adds his biographer, "that it filled all his days, and two or three nights in the week."

Hard as he worked, and useful as he was, he seems to have been merely used just so long as he was useful, and during the whole of that time to have longed for leisure and retirement. In 1656 he was sent to England under pretence of seeking this retirement, but in reality to be useful as a spy. Being seized instead of another man, he was not released until he found security of £1000, a heavy sum in those days, which he could not pay, and which was found for him by Dr. Scarborough. In the same year he published his poems, declaring in the preface, "that his desire had been for some time past, and did even now vehemently continue, to retire himself to some of the American plantations, and to forsake this world for ever."

This desire, of which Johnson speaks far too severely, saying, "If his activity was virtue, his retreat was cowardice," was natural enough. His essays will tell us how he loved retirement; he was sick of courts and courtly ingratitude; and when he returned to his own country, had stepped into a prison. He was obliged to obtain an order to be created doctor of physic, and to practise to gain a subsistence, and thereby irritated some of his friends. He went into France again, "having," says Johnson quaintly, "made a copy of verses on Oliver's death." The truth seems to be that Cowley really did admire Cromwell. His bond of security was never cancelled, and in France, perhaps, he acted coldly

to the king's party, though he remained there till the general delivery at the Restoration. He had been made a Doctor of Physic at Oxford in 1657, and at the commencement of the Royal Society he appears busy among the experimental philosophers with the title of Dr. Cowley. He fitted himself for practice by an extensive study of botany, and with questionable taste tried to display the qualities of herbs in elegiac verse, and the uses of trees in heroic numbers.

At the Restoration, Cowley raised a song of triumph. He had been promised by both Charles I. and II. the Mastership of the Savoy; but kings' words were then worth little, and Anthony Wood tells us, "he lost it by certain persons, enemies to the muses." He fitted up his old comedy, the Guardian, as a new piece, "Cutter of Coleman Street."[1] This was considered as a satire on the Royalists, and condemned. Dryden went with Sprat to the first night, and told Dennis the critic that when Cowley was told of his ill-success, "he received the news not with so much firmness as might have been expected of so great a man."

No wonder; ingratitude and neglect do not render every susceptible poet stronger. He tells us in his defence, "that having followed the royal family through all their distresses, it was not then likely at the Restoration

[1] Dr. Johnson calls it *The* Cutter of Coleman Street, but the play is without the article. "A merry sharking fellow," one, Cutter, is the chief person in the comedy which brought him into trouble; hence the vindication which we print amongst his prose works.—Ed.

that he should begin a quarrel with them." They quarrelled with him, and he felt it, that much is certain; he wrote a poem called the "Complaint," wherein he calls himself the melancholy Cowley, and this, with the usual fortune of complaints, seems to have excited more contempt than pity. Certain loyalist poets twitted him with this in doggerel verse, which shows plainly enough the suspicion whereon Cowley's misfortunes are to be laid. The verses are on the choice of a Laureate:—

Savoy-missing Cowley came into the court,
Making apologies for his bad play;
Every one gave him so good a report,
That Apollo gave heed to all he could say:

Nor would he have had, 'tis thought, a rebuke,
Unless he had done some notable folly;
With verses unjustly in praise of Sam Tuke,[2]
Or printed his pitiful melancholy.

Authors generally receive their worst wounds from those of their own craft; and Cowley, no doubt, felt these bitterly. No wonder, then, that, as Johnson sneeringly says, and throughout the Dr. has a strong bias against the poet, "his vehement desire of retirement now came again upon him." Johnson even finds fault with Anthony Wood (calling him the morose Wood) for the mild reproval expressed in this true sentence, "Not finding that preferment conferred upon him

[2] Sir Samuel Tuke was the original whence Butler caricatured Hudibras; but here one is tempted to think that the name stands for "Noll Cromwell."