



The Task, and Other Poems

William Cowper

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After the publication of his "Table Talk" and other poems in March, 1782, 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,—

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